POETRY
FEBRUARY 2021

The Practice of Freedom

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The Practice of Freedom

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POEMS

Haven't poems declared everyone from all sorts of experiences essential and human?

Tara Betts

Tara Betts

To Keep a Green Branch from Snapping

Love is contraband in Hell,
cause love is an acid
that eats away bars.
—Assata Shakur

The editors of this issue read thousands of poems submitted by people who have experienced incarceration, which were winnowed down to the sampling here. We have been working collectively toward publication since 2017. The contributors, who are often no longer perceived as people in the non-incarcerated world, are indeed human. Many of them have partners, families, friends, and try to help other people. Some of them have made mistakes. Some have faced cycles of violence and abuse themselves. I hope that people come to this issue with open minds, and I'd like to underscore that openness by saying that poets are not members of the jury. No one undertook this project to declare a verdict on any of the contributors therein. Although many of these poems are about the lived experiences of being contained—sometimes indefinitely—by the state, we discovered poems about subjects that some of us hadn't considered. We read the words of poets from across the country and outside of it, from poets of different faiths, races, cultures, and abilities. None of these poems romanticized prison or glamorized aspects of how they ended up there. We were not looking for a poetic noire. We hope that we gathered some work that illustrates honesty and vulnerability. We considered a range of issues that the contributors wrote about, but each poem took on some compelling element that moved us as artists and writers editing this issue.

This brings me to a poem that kept resonating in that electric tissue of my mind. I found myself carrying around Nazim Hikmet's poem "Some Advice to Those Who Will Serve Time in Prison." If you've never heard of Hikmet, he was a Turkish poet born in 1902 in Salonika, now Thessaloníki, Greece. I have always taught this poem in jails and prisons because it often becomes a lighthouse moment. A beacon of awareness swings into view for at least a few students because they realize that someone, imprisoned for a long time for his political beliefs, wrote poetry that speaks with a deceptive simplicity and captures their experiences. They find affirmation that their own experiences are worth writing about too.

The last time I taught this poem was in 2019 at Stateville prison, a men's maximum security prison just outside of Chicago, where I've taught poetry workshops for almost three years. On that cold spring day in the small concrete square known as "the education building," we read Hikmet's poem. There were two moments that the poets reading and discussing it were

completely fascinated with—when Hikmet says,

> To wait for letters inside,
> to sing sad songs,
> or to lie awake all night staring at the ceiling
> is sweet but dangerous,

and when Hikmet advises, after a woman stops loving you, to do the following:

> Don't say it's no big thing:
> it's like the snapping of a green branch
> to the man inside.

When it comes to the "sweet but dangerous" distractions that exist in such tenuous conditions, the people inside prisons know them and some do their best to dodge them altogether, but that "snapping of a green branch" caught each of the poets off guard. How dare Hikmet describe that kind of vulnerability where a branch can bend and nearly snap. How did he so simply describe an act that could lead to an irrevocable break where a person cannot return to what they were before?

On March 7, 2020, I unknowingly taught my last in-person poetry workshop at Stateville. The students were already murmuring about COVID-19 because they follow the news more closely than many people beyond such confines. I reassured them that I'd be back because I had no idea how fatal this pandemic would be, especially for Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color, who have suffered significantly throughout 2020 due to this unprecedented health disaster and the persistent racism that underpins police brutality. During 2020, and in the years to come, *Poetry* magazine will be dealing with its own legacy and challenges with race and privilege. As a guest editor, I couldn't think of a better time to showcase the brilliance and challenging subjects presented by poets here, who represent so many marginalized communities. I corresponded with some of my students throughout the summer of 2020. At least two of them were diagnosed with COVID-19, and one at Stateville died from it.

As startling developments evolved and the National Guard set up a mobile hospital on the prison grounds, I heard more stories where prisons across the country turned deadly, and many people have protested for medical releases and pardons to help loved ones escape the infectious conditions of prisons and get home to hopefully safer family environments. When I've participated in readings and talks online, I've discussed these conditions because people are often curious about what happens in prisons, but this is also an opportunity to turn analytical and creative eyes toward how these institutions do not address human needs and rights.

As Americans, many people simply think about human rights as an issue

in distant countries or as the fodder of strident poems. This issue of *Poetry* magazine challenges both of these notions. Most of these poems came out of America, where we are now thinking about which workers are essential. Haven't poems declared everyone from all sorts of experiences essential and human? If not, they should. These poems consider the practices of freedom and the lack of it.

Many of the poems here address the "small freedoms" that Hikmet described. Those freedoms are allowed or taken away by people who are deeply involved with what we now call mass incarceration, the carceral state, or the prison industrial complex. When you read these poems and the essays by my coeditors Joshua Bennett and Sarah Ross, as well as contributors Roshad Meeks and Audrey Petty, and look closely at the stunning collection of visual art, think about the poets discussing Hikmet's poem. Consider how they set their pens to paper to offer advice with thoughtful metaphors and tender line breaks. They can speak for themselves. Even if you visit a prison, you may never fully understand that lived experience, unless you've served time yourself.

T.L. Perez

"Fog Count": Inmates Walk from Chow

Fog against the prison fence.

Crows eating crumbs
from the generous.

The yard's secure
with extra guards.

Birdsongs interlace
their scraggly gaits.

Rick Anderson

A Flower in the Burn Scar

I see you peeking timidly
from between the skeletal bars
of your bleached, bony fortress,
vibrant colors a sign of defiance
in this scorched grayscape.
I hear your silent exclamation
of resurgence and rebirth.

Your seed burrowed deep
as the buck sheltered you
from the raging furnace above.
He must have been fearless,
offering himself as sanctuary
to your unborn, fragile beauty
in the face of nature's fury.

He nourishes you still, I think.
His essence feeds your tiny roots
as his spirit rises in your petals
and radiates from your golden eye.
His iron will lives within you,
reflected in your bright bloom
reaching up toward the sun.

I wonder what you see
from your apocalyptic high ground,
up among the blackened stumps,
baked cinders, and ash.
The charred hillside gives nothing
but perhaps you look toward
what will follow as you grow.

This barren charnel floor
will be healed someday.
The Mother will make it so.
She bestows her healing powers
as part of a grand design
that always lives on.
You are the hope she sends.

The Ghosts Are Laughing

Within the bony armor
of this disordered mind
ticks a callous timepiece;
a ruthless agent of judgment
there to punish, to remind.
Like slowly dripping water,
its monotony is unrelenting,
straining the thin threads
suspending my desperation.
Its claw-like hands reach out,
slashing honed razors,
each tick slicing deeply
into my tenuous sanity.
Teetering over the edge,
I topple into affectless isolation
and the refuge of memory.

I try but can't remember
that one last moment
of contented silence,
that perfect frame of
simple, sweet stillness.
And I can't always discern
realities from fantasies,
or truths from imaginings,
inside my mental carnival.
Confused and perplexed,
I ask the questions aloud
but the ghosts only laugh.
They already know the things
I have yet to learn
in the hardest of ways.

Inevitably I will learn
—I am learning—
that being alone,
being lonely always,
being nothing forevermore
is a burden far greater
than I have ever known

and I cannot bear it.
So, like the ghosts before me,
I will dream of the Boatman
and passage into the void
to surrender myself
unto the Timekeeper
and beg him to stop the clock.

David A. Pickett

Disaster Is in the Eye of the Beholder

I used to live in a single-
wide, tilted on blocks
in a dusty trailer park,
or as the sign said
to trucks that rumbled by,
a much more respectable
Mobile Home Court.

Thin pressboard panels
hid a million roachy lives:
turning on the lights
sent them fleeing, back
into the walls; tiny
feet pattered like rain
showers in retreat
from the sun.

I used to dream
of a terrible storm—
one to reach down
with a dark, twisted arm
and pick up those trailers,
those non-mobile un-homes,
crush them in a cloudy fist
and scatter them like seeds
across a plowed and fertile land.

section eight

i come from the broken
playground littered with dented coke-can

crack pipes, bullet shells, and bottle shards
that scarred my arches;

from my mother's squeaky, yellow
rubber gloves, and the burnt-grease smell

of my dad's mushy fried chicken.
i belong to my father's heavy leather belt,

my girlfriend's well-oiled windows
and foot-long bricks of blank-

label cheese that sweated orange.
i come from crowding

with other families around
a boxy, aluminum community

mailbox the first of every month, my mom's sweet,
cucumber-scented face cream that left lips oily,

and, "i'm so proud of you, son,"
though i am nothing to be proud of.

Elvis Alves

Parchman Prison

Nine miles from Tutwiler, MS, 2017

Built to last, hold bodies as a hole that runs
to infinity and back. Black gold never sold.

Time was never enough until time stops in here and you
are surrounded by selves without direction to go beyond

a state of degeneration. Authorized penetration of body, mind,
and soul. Nothing has ever been good to the person

behind your doors. Nothing comes out alive. A refuse that society
does not want back. A thing unlike other things. The bottom of a

swamp built beneath a swamp. You get what you want
except for freedom because it comes with a price. Your body, mind,

and soul. All that is glued together, the mind breaks from. All that the
mind breaks from is glued together. We stick together like glue. We fight

for breath. A taste of air. A taste of anything that does not remind us
of the years a judge wrote on paper, sealed our destiny, and shut us up here.

Spoon Jackson

At Night I Fly

I soar with the red-tailed hawk.
I battle demons, blocking, kicking,
And screaming.

Sometimes gliding during the day,
Looking out of my window theater,
A narrow slit at the back
Of the cell,
3 inches wide and 3 feet long.

I cherish the buzzards, turkeys, geese,
Deer, wild dogs, coyotes, snakes,
And rock doves.

I see spiders sparring
At different levels in the windowsill.
Sometimes I see my past
In the window theater.

Even after 4 decades in prison
Not one day goes by
Without me hating myself
For the life I took.

Sometimes I sprain my foot
Kicking the walls
In my dreams.
Why was I chosen to kill
And not be killed?

I get up from my bunk,
Broken with remorse and sorrow,
The pain eating at my marrow.
I wonder when is enough enough.

Here where I must live
Every moment
And breathe in every breath.
Here in my window theater at night
I dream of ruby-painted toes.

Isn't it enough you keep me away
From people I could surely help,
From clean water, nutritious food?
Isn't it enough you keep me away
From family and friends so long
Most have passed on?

You keep me away from a woman's breath,
Touch, scent, and voice.
Isn't it enough you keep me away
From resting my head
In her lap to sleep or weep?

Whose sins am I praying
For now after 41 years?
I look in my window theater
And see no moon tonight.

Look at the first picture
Of me incarcerated.
Look at me today.
You don't see the changes?
Close your eyes and you'll see
Inside change as well.

How can a man stay sane
And not have a woman in his life?
It is hell, when you see
A woman and cannot say hello
To her as a man to a woman.

Isn't it enough you keep
Me away from accomplishing
Many of my goals?

Isn't it enough you keep me away
From flowers and deserts,
From parks, valleys, mountains,
Rivers, trees, and seas,

Mountains and dreams
That I could see
From the barred window theater.
Isn't it enough.

Old School

A correctional sergeant tells
His officers
There will be no cell moves
That inmates must
Fight or fuck
The old-fashioned way

Even when prisoners
Don't get along
There are no cell changes
You must fight or fuck

Even if you refused
To cell up with the devil
Fight or fuck is your
Only way out

And maybe one day
We will move you
But you must fight
Or fuck

When you don't get along
You must make it
Funky with your bunky
Fight or fuck or both

I've been down over
40 years
And I don't know
What old-school shit
This sergeant spoke of

Because old-school convicts
Guards and prisoners
Have always been one of respect

The myth—the silly notion
Of fight or fuck
Perpetuated by Pepsi generation
Cops and officials

Those misguided folks
Would have been called out
To the parking lot
And dealt with by
Old-school guards and officials

For old school is respect

Mike Owens

In My Cell

Forty books, mostly poetry,
religion, or politics. Four times
the number I'm allowed.

A Smith Corona Wordsmith 250
that will sometimes, while printing,
go inexplicably berserk.

Appellate briefs, legal work
from my own little war of attrition:
The State vs. Michael Owens.

Old letters from loved ones,
some who left to join the ancestors,
some who just left.

And of course, my guilt,
always in the periphery of my vision,
weighing down the air.

Devon Terrell

Gambler's Remorse

Whisper me a secret lyric
grind the melody with my bones
let the wind from the trumpet
scatter the ash for miles

winner's prize in loser's grip
empty me with tease o' sleaze
bankrupt emotions in debt
there's no play left

I dropped a tear in the coin slot
gambled it away on games
did you make then break the rule
we both played but you cashed out

Leroy Went North (1973)

i
let da die
cast and lay its all bena gamble
        i bet half my scramble
days tween earnin keep and lonely

nights
        my last might
gon strum dis here riggidy guitar
        gots no home gots no star
up dere in dat black canopy

nope
        i laffs jokes
be good fo ones widda funnybone
        saw george price's woman one
come ovuh from missippi she

say
        leroy play
me a song dis ol man wits be quick
like a match strike an if
george gon be unda henry work

truck
        imma tuck
her in widda tune that make old lovers
wonna see if covers
still get warm afta all dat time

strange
        i had range
dis episode take proly 3–4
hours drank lil nap ya know
aint ben in no bed so roomy

maw
on my paw
always say outta dey 13 kids
i da chile who cheese slid
of da cracka i makes her

moan
george come home
dat white woman scream get dis nigga
off me! his hands wenna
wrenchin now im in chicago

Darrell B. Grayson

Ghosts Over the Boiler

A hall flunky informed
The cubical operator
Of a man hanging in his cell.

I lifted my head,
As I was one at the time.
Eventually, a guard walked
To that part of the Row.

Preacher's death was like the others,
Nope, wasn't the first time:
It started with a complaint,
The fixable kind.

The guard manages every step.
He takes out his key,
Opens the outer door,
Walks to the cell door.

He sees Preacher banging,
Walks to the cubicle,
Calls the operator and mumbles something,
Lights a cigarette, then leaves.

Eventually,
A fat nurse climbs the stairs.
Another guard passes her,
I continue to mop.

Eventually, they come out with Preacher
On a stretcher with a sheet.
I know he is dead.
It is on his face.

Like ghosts they walk.
The guard and nurse,
They were talking about buying a truck.
Didn't hear what kind.

Well, I told a few guys.
They said:
He was a strange old fellow,
Tried to change cells.

One not over the boiler.
He said he couldn't take the heat.
I said, *Yeah,*
Those other guys are fed up too.

It was bound to happen again,
But what can you do
When you're a ghost over the boiler?

First published in *Against Time* (Mercy Seat Press, 2005). Published with permission of the rightsholders.

Janine Solursh

Forgotten Portraits

Suddenly nobody knows where you are.
You're just a memory,
an echo,
an idea thin as smoke.
Your last text, call, letter, Facebook post—
only footprints in the surf.
Your edges blur and you become
a friend's story,
a lover's history.

Initially, you beat against the panes in set-aside frames
begging to be taken out
and rolled into motion once more.
But after a second winter,
then a third, and fourth,
there comes something serene and warm
behind the haze that smokes the broken hourglass.
Something new
and just for you.
This world belongs to you and yours
and when you glance back and recall your life's movement
with a sigh of days gone by,
you are irrevocably comforted
having become that final exhale
that hangs in the air after the passing.
You pose
and hold it.

We are all the dead.
I am not apart from you for long,
except for breath,
except for everything.

Leigh Sugar

Freeland: An Erasure

The world is the world.
—Srikanth Reddy

Day forms night over again in fine glass sheets of blue.
The unit is.
See my body, a shifting silver ministry.
Hell kicked over two days ago; ground officers shaped time into this shape.
Our country's a scene in a movie.
A banger, a masterlock, an extension cord, respectively.
Sit inside your anything beautiful, your anything song.
It's not so bad.

———

Natural life swings wide, turns physical.
Like a good family, we fetch water, mind honor, write letters.
Dream the loose blue tank top, the ceaseless white.
The mirror rejects your reflection, citing *inappropriate content.*
Dayroom immigrants melt into threads of crucial affiliations.
My father's contaminating line shares a bottle with me.
A grin strains, readjusts, speaks an earthy state.
Cleaned up, you can culture a facility refund.

———

The US approached with coffee and a bed.
Tired, I read, ate.
Tomorrow the cages will wait for their respective dogs.
A hot bus glows with peppers, tomatoes, carrots—a premeditated drive-through art.
The origami engineering is a dream.
Hanging from stardust, the installed concertina almost winking.
My window opens to a very small wire.
Beyond the glowing retrospect, a region shines.

———

As a boy, I could hop a chain-link fence.
I breathed snow.
I convinced the kids from school the sky was my mother.

Here, men play heroes to crickets in the yard.
I used to run mountains, but I've never been on a train.
I've gotten used to the warehouse.
The world waterfalls to a future beyond this grass and dirt.
I've learned a person can still grow in a pool of gray.

Possible futures pour like loud blues from too-small headphones.
I know mine is not murdered.
Let me say it again: I know my future is not murdered.
A wrench heavies through, tumors hours into years.
Divorced from peers, entire legs become teeth, then clamshells, then solid crystal.
I see people freeze, then melt, then freeze.
I would like to ask for home's number, take her to dinner sometime.
Sixty each pull-ups, chin-ups, and push-ups premeditate a glistening *out there.*

Not even Eliot or Pound approach the melancholy weapon of the punitive farm.
In profile, I separate from this justice.
Tattoo economy pens my skin into a letter.
Dear anyone.
Distorted paintings brush against the sentence.
Any box will logic a soul into a numbered life.
I don't know what I look like.
I picture my sister running and playing games when my mind is being searched.

Even inside this U-shaped slab, I don't worry about my safety.
I lock my life to a flower pressed between books.
My mom and dad and brother and sister and grandparents and friends all have names.
Bodies and names as infinite as fields of corn.
So do I.
I tell them to sit in the grass and look up at storms and melting lights.
Look and look because they can.

I know one day I will be held again.

—

Some days I walk and talk with other men.
Some days we sprint and lift ourselves until we flower into muscle.
We package our adult selves into small metal walls.
We don't say we feel like paper in a fountain.
Instead, *Dear fish,* we write.
Dear kids and bare skin and crickets outside the fence.

Dear Cheerios, dear cherries, and pretzels, and chocolate chips,
and chocolate bars with orange in them. Dear iced tea
and making out. Dear school. Dear New Hampshire and California
and New York
and Detroit. Dear barbershops
and the shape of clothes not blue:

I remember you.

This poem is an erasure of letters received from Justin Rovillos Monson between 2014–2017.

Justin Rovillos Monson

From "Weapon or Considering the Evidence Against Me"

America, God bless you if it's good to you
America, please take my hand
can you help me understand—
—Kendrick Lamar, "XXX"

If I'm transformed by language, I am often
crouched in footnote or blazing in title.
Where in the body do I begin
—Layli Long Soldier

EXHIBIT A)
FRANTZ FANON: The first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not go beyond certain limits.

LOLO: You have to get an education, because there's really no other way to make money.

TONY MONTANA: In this country, you gotta make the money first. Then when you get the money, you get the power.

FRANTZ FANON: This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess;
his dreams are of action and of aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming,
running, climbing: I dream that I burst out laughing, that I span a river in one
stride; or that I am followed by a flood of motor cars which never catch up with me.

EXHIBIT B)
you asked me how it felt, the cold

steel cradled in my young hands. nothing.
it felt like nothing. just space in a cradle
of air & winter dust at that point I was pure
spine & bass. I thought I was everything
as the snow fell around our streets in furies.

years flew over me & I began the trebles

of scarring my body with the people I love.
simultaneously, I threaded my crimes through my skin.

EXHIBIT C)
(there was no middle class in the Philippines back then. you were poor or you were rich.)

(...)

(yeah, I'd say so, I'd say we were rich.)

facts:
I came from a legacy of village traders.
the Japanese operated out of the family compound during the occupation.
my Lolo was the youngest & scrappiest of four brothers.
his father bankrolled the school in their village.
all of his brothers became doctors & lawyers; he became a mechanical engineer.
I only remember his hands covered in grease & grime; his gold rings flaked in oil.

hearsay:
I believed my bloodline to be steeped in peasantry.
turns out my veins are swollen with the blood of provincial aristocrats.
to fight both battles is to exhaust all remedies.
[did you sell drugs?]
my Lolo brought his new family to the West to give our blood an American education.
he could no longer stand to be the fourth prince & wanted more than fields for the heirs of his body.
[but did you sell drugs?]
one could say you recognized my inheritance, chromosomes waiting to ignite your suburbs.
I have always been brilliant at bending the rules; all matter has the historic ability to flex long before a breaking point.
[but did you sell drugs?]

yes. I sold drugs.

[are you sorry?]
I am still apologizing in many ways.

EXHIBIT D)
a friend who is a Trump supporter asks: "well, what about all the people in Chicago who are killing their own kind? why isn't that being focused on?"

I draw up a field & introduce him to creation, how each buried statue has found evidence that the body is flexible enough to kneel & rigid enough to become a weapon, the line too often blurred with bleached palms; the mind simply tracks & catalogs.

I direct him to the tautology of partisan politics & we lift steel to reclaim the spaces we inhabit.

EXHIBIT E)
I am told by an officer that I don't look like I belong in prison, even with all the tattoos.
I look like I hail
from a nice, respectful family.

later, I read about Evangelista Torricelli, who reasoned that we live "at the bottom of an ocean of air."

Notes for If I Fade Away

For your future daughters

tell them—inside the language
of night—Trip's story. how he downed
bottles of rotgut to build a free morning, unshackled
inside a massive cage—a captive
King. the dewy grass, soaked & rotted wood
of every picnic table in sight, ragtag gang
formations under the morning lights. please
tell them how Trip slurred a Thursday
to make-believe he had stumbled home—back
to that country called Grandville Ave.
yet stayed tightly held inside these fences
we share, damn near tears
telling a lifer about this cold network which has grown
reckless to be the father of all these lost
men.—*all they know is Daddy,* he said
& so the threads of home weave inward
& like clockwork they return to their Patriarch. please
tell them how everyone & no one knew
Trip had stabbed another boy & the panoptic lenses
collected each moment, how his warm hand held
a glint of steel—sharpened down to six inches
of hard desire—& how the soft skin of a cheek
accents like a comma in a long love poem, when a banger
thrusts above an open mouth—each stab a secret
as intimate as Adam's finger reaching toward
God or lips pressing your temple, your lover's tongue
tracing your inner thigh. tell them some bodies
die over this—the closeness of open skin
& how there always flows another stanza
somewhere. how Trip was cuffed & stripped
& sent to the hole—& how Ruben fell under suicide watch
after he adopted a rap for the hot steel, weeks before
being released to the echoes of Glenwood & Webber.
tell them how blood & steel & longing
& all those avenues & streets compose a music
of endless search that trickles down like rain
upon the edge of our world & its religion
of warm flesh.

Notes for If I Fade Away

Brownout '03

Featuring Robert Hass, Kendrick Lamar, and Jay-Z

this is to remind you that I loved you
way back. you, with your sleepless
rivers & strings of power lines—titans
gathered into formations of tender
flesh & luminous pleasure. you
are always moving. *longing, we say,*
because desire is full of endless distances.
an apartment building. two boys different
shades of brown. sun above, acting
as father. prayer as two fists arcing—brown
boy with good hair choked by the parentheses
of his shoulders. light-skinned boy
on his stomach—broken horse. please don't
mistake these notes for elegies. *these are the breaks*

the summer where I learned of hunger & the absence
of pain. Bridgewater, that slagheap
hooptee moored in our oak-ridden suburbs. glimmers
of future lives. Sashabaw, Dixie,
Maybee. loose change for 75-cent coneys. the big homies
pushing bags behind the skatepark—all the white
paint peeling off the divider wall. the chain-link
fence we tore back between our cracked pavement
& the fairway. the brownout that melted five
days—how I dipped my feather-light body
in the tub to keep cool. the water
searching me like so many soft lights. the general
mind was hollow back then & I did then as I do now—
etched your patterns into the margins
of my ribs. this was before *meet me*
at the corner wash or *your turn to go*
to the Marathon became slang for the lies
we believed. before the 3AM streetlights,
the palms crowded with earthtones. before I learned
logic & before we should've read *Hamlet*. *Lord,*
we know who we are yet we know not what

we may be. where I learned to be in the middle
of bright islands & dimebags. those whisper-filled trees,
the pavement begging to kiss my knees.

Jill McDonough

Freedom

I talk to the students in jail about freedom, how in America
we obsess over it, write it over flags on T-shirts, spread

it around under eagles. It has something to do with guns
and fireworks, Harley-Davidsons, New Hampshire, living free

until you're dead. I tell the students I think the people
fetishizing freedom don't mean it. That they really mean

LOOK OVER HERE, AWAY FROM ALL THE SLAVERY
WE DID, AWAY FROM ALL THE JAIL! I tell them they

are the experts, ask them to write what freedom means:
privacy is freedom and *if you feel held back, afraid*

to do something, you're not completely free. No fear
of loss. No fear of hunger, no fear of pain. A body

to call my own, a voice driven by my own mind.
The security of a dry, warm place to sleep. To own

my own time left here. Being able to hold my son
at night. Showering in private. Freedom to me

is having the choice to walk away from a fight. Freedom
a work in progress. Everyday freedom, the real work for us all.

Donuts in Kid-Jail

Here is how often you see donuts in kid-jail: never. Zero
times. Like seeing a cat or a dog, a cell phone. A white
kid, a comfy chair. Just me and this one kid, same kid
who wrote *Monkey Rescue* first time we worked together.
He saved Junior from a fire, then they got high by the pool.
I drew hearts and stars in the margins, helped spell "monkey,"
wrote GREAT JOB! They gave this kid two donuts, a small
carton of milk, and we wrote imitations of "One Art," me
with no breakfast yet. My stomach growled. The kid
looked up, both of us remembering I have a body. That
everybody gets hungry, whether or not they are free.
This cracked us up, and he offered me a donut. So I said
You are a sweetheart and I am never going to eat your donut.
Which made no sense to him. *Dude, I have a car and money—*
I can walk out of here and buy a dozen as soon as you finish
this poem. So he kept working. An empty classroom, "One Art,"
sharp pencil, still room. *What are some things you have lost?*
Mother, Father, Sister. Grandmother, school, ring. Country.
Bracelet. My stomach kept growling, we kept laughing, he
kept offering me a donut. Donut as distraction. Donut:
a gift. Finally he said *Look, I'm going to go pee. Then you*
can eat the donut with no one watching. Donut as test!
He left, and I said to the guard, *Hey I'm going to eat*
that kid's donuts real quick-like while he's gone. And the guard
was horrified, said he'd give me five bucks to not touch
the kid's donuts, explained donuts are hard to come by
in juvie, blah blah blah blah donuts. While I'm like *I WAS JUST*
KIDDING! I WOULD NEVER MESS WITH THE PRECIOUS
DONUTS! Kid came back, and we finished his draft, which
he asked me to keep till next time. And I drove away, past
Forest Hills and new condo construction, Blissful Monkey
yoga studio, Whole Foods. Parked my car and walked into my
house, where no one hurts me, where I eat whatever I want.

Kirk Nesset

One Place Is as Good as the Next

to begin. The bobwhite's nest. Redstarts on branches
in birches, phoebes peeping from rotting eaves.

Begin with an unfinished page, crickets scraping
away in the pantry. Much has been said about

the soul and the corner bodega. Much has been said
about the soul taking leave, pleased

at times as it seems to exit the body. Begin
not with goodbye but the wet gravel ditch. With

the ruts and strut and fret of a life overturned,
giant Rain Bird whipping water. Start

with a luxury barge. With human hubris. With
having no teeth but eating meat no matter what.

With the woman in Akron cutting a tornado in two
with her tongue. Begin, if you must, unhooked

and detached. Shattered. The morning will answer
itself, having said all it can say about

the shovel-nosed snake and oriole's aerial cradle,
mud daubers daubing by the meandering river.

Clemonce Heard

School-to-Prison Pants

After Laurie Thomas

They had to be Dickies®, not Dockers®.
They had to include a cellphone pocket
on the right leg, & feign a faint hanging
off our tails in spite of a belt's strangling
support. They had to scream prison, jail,
scream water's rising, scream help-p-p-p
from the lowest floor. But unlike water
they couldn't rise, couldn't obey a warden
lest they risk being jive. They had to be
spread wider than bars. They couldn't be
starched or pressed, but steamed via dryer.
They had to be creaseless, but crisp, khaki
as a waterline staining crest-white Nikes®;
Forces. Lord forbid they be high waters.

Paper Cells

Thong slipper in hand, I am waiting
for the wasp to stop scaling my window.

Waiting for it to dip & escape the blinds
casting prison stripes across my stance.

The wasp's trailing abdomen resembles
a semicolon's leaden half, & flutters

like a bulb's trembling filament. The insect
flirts with its own reflection like a man

too lovely to be left behind the girth
of steel bars. The pining pest is desperate,

desiring a way out of the great indoors.
Intruder turned inmate, predator turned

prey. The day my cousin, his eyes light
as clay, pled not guilty, said that the bleak

stabbing was an accident, I thought fear
could make the meekest person lunge

in haste. I thought of the blood as its
own venom, the Black man as phylum

that most frequently wanders into prison.
The two yellow, floral pillows guarding

both ends of my foam futon cannot be
pollinated. I stand clapping my sandal's

sole against my palm like a watchman's
baton, unable to take my narrow eyes off

the wasp's stubborn stinger humping
the sill like a man whose hands are cuffed

& isn't granted permission for conjugal
visits. My cousin proclaims the day he

was paroled into unlikely circumvention
is the same day his son was conceived,

his pupils swelling to the size of tunnels
in a paper nest, as he swears that his boy

was as calculated as a heist, right before
being detained once again. His fiancée

lugging a wreathed fetus in her stomach,
bobbing & breathing a subtle staccato.

Outside, another wasp raps my pane
in a hysterical hover, its home dangling

over its mandible like a mistletoe tacked
beneath an eave, the comb unreachable

to the detainee struggling to break free
from an invisible penitentiary. How long

will you practice insanity, I ask, as it flits
back & forth in a crazed pace. How long

will your lanky legs crawl in the direction
of a lover you can lay your sights on

but cannot embrace? I watch both parties
press their tarsals into the glass, witness

the imprisoned wasp inch down to dust,
& the other plunge into a budding bush.

Emile DeWeaver

Profile

You see me swagger to a stop
at the crosswalk, chin bobbing on
the currents of my playlist, and the Nike

Swoosh on my sleeveless says
I hold my shape after washing.
I look upstreet, presenting you

the question curving along my cheek.
What a nice man you're thinking,
his Afro is nonthreatening

like a light bulb invented by Thomas Edison.
You're having ideas, right? Weighing
myths and elongating for answers.

I'm walking your way, broad as day,
and you have to choose. Do
you relax your shoulders and step

into the street or clench your toes
and face your faith in the human
race: all men are created

sequals, every black
man is not a syllable.

Andrey Egorov

Warm Colors

Translated from the Russian by Tatiana Retivov

In a month among inmates
living in the same cell
their misbaha beads begin
to rotate in synch

The orange smells of sunshine
of irrepressible laughter
of breath heavy from running
after a shuttlecock
of anything but an orange
the scent of oranges is forbidden
by internal regulations

The inmate moves slowly
like a surgeon
performing open
heart surgery
on his own daughter
underwater
with hands tied
using a razor blade

The inmate's sleep is light
deep
light
and then so deep
that morning inspection
seems a continuation
of yet another nightmare

The inmate's memory
is turned inside out
facing toward the future
where engraved in fire
burn the first words
enshrined by the last prophet

eet
dun't die
rite a book

———

Awake for three hours
with eyes shut:
the inmate's sleep is slow
as everything else

As the blood
from a languidly slit
wrist artery
slowly soaks
the thin mattress

Gathers into drops
wistfully draws polka dots
on the inmate's face
on the lower bunk

Until the thin
pulsing fountain
runs out finally
too soon

butterfingers you
can't even croak
lazily fumes the inmate

Rubs the throbbing scar
while crouched on the too
short
narrow
hard
(nothing here is done halfway)
bunk bed

Turns over on his other side
rubs his forehead
shoos away the thoughts
of a free man—
too pure
to be thought here

Sulkily ponders over
the boy who lived
when life itself disowned its children
and about the main character
bound to get mistaken for the author
no matter that the latter

is confirmed dead
deeply buried
forever forgotten

Manuscript Found in a Nutshell

Dedicated to my cellmate in the prison mental hospital, Dmitry Vatulin, thanks to whom I managed to keep my sanity during my first days there. Dmitry was sentenced to ten years of strict regime for drug trafficking, despite the lack of any proper evidence.

Sections I, IV, VI, and VII translated from the Russian by Tatiana Retivov, remaining sections written by Andrey Egorov in English

I

The impudent clang of locks
lops off blessed sleep at midway.
Angels convulsively putter about
sleep's stump and then perish.

Foxes hide briskly in their foxholes
looking out from under their lids
in red alarm
into the outer dark—

there where one of our own,
mind you not the worst,
is given 5 minutes to pack,
not enough for even his bundles
which only need to be tied.

II

It's the end of May, four-twenty in the morn.
With jest and joke our fellow
deftly packs the would-be necessities
into a dozen makeshift sacks

I admit, his smile looks convincing—
as they take him away,
his smile, devoid of cheer, and then, of face,

still stays on, etched in stale air, and looks convincing.

III

Angels of our golden dreams
cut in halves with the heavy serrated *now*,
devoid of what's left of the moist matter of sleep—
freeze, dead, in crescent-like poses

and thus,
the 4:20 in the morning
is the time of the crescents:

the first one, intervened in our sleep,
the serrated clang of the lock;

the second one, the Cheshire crescent
of our good fellow's parting smile.
I'd lie if I said he never looked low
but ne'er too much, most certainly, not now;

the third one—every dying body
of the life flock of our dream angels
cut in half, dried down lifeless;

not to mention the crescent of the moon
that could or could not
but most certainly had to
shine through the bars
witnessing the ongoing abomination.

IV

But even if it did, the moonlight reached us
through the bars of Butyrka,
through the cold glow of a warden's projector
and the residue of sleep in our eyes—

then whatever left of it, died in towering cloud,
that devoured us as we envisioned
ten years
the term that our inmate was to serve.

V

Ten years—ten and a half: put a year for each evidence,
then add another eight, for the lack of proper evidence
makes room for the excessive amounts of justice—
there, do you hear it? *"Tshuhs-tee-sss!"*

Behold! Lady Justice at its worst: blindfold, blunt sword,
coiled body, length after length,
slithering into a court room—
"All rise, the court isss in sssesssion"—
cold, serpentine, scaleless.

VI

"Ssscales!"—there, cheap electronic scales,
a circumstantial evidence, becomes an alchemy tool
to transfigure old junkie into drug lord,
to deliver judgment beyond measure and scale—

to deliver a junkie from any temptation—
into Hell, a gaping tomb, long past overcrowded.
Wrong place for such a lively old man, or whoever else.
Who'd come and bargain for another junkie's soul?

"Not by thy merit thou art dignified,"
scrawny Cerberus would have snarled,
wondering how scarce became guilt these days,
though justice is so abundant and vastly delivered.
But Cerberus has mouths to feed.
And it says nothing.
It turns away.
It grins.
It grins.

VII

Come morning we cast lots
for the belongings of the departed:
a pullover, a shirt, and baseball cap

fit me just fine,
like they were to me tailored:
the departed was a tall old man,
lean and sturdy.

VIII

I turn my new baseball cap
backwards, kid-style,
and quit thinking of Dmitry Yurievich

as the deceased
as an old man
as bone marrow

now fought over by
the maws of Cerberus.

Yurievich, I wish this fiend
to choke on you to death.

The old man would have chuckled sarcastically,
still, he'd appreciate it, that's for sure.

Iram of the Myriad of Pillars

FIRST

Everlasting City of the Myriad of Pillars
sends out caravans through time
to trade with itself

trinkets by trinkets by trinkets
change hands
wearing away
into sand.

His Royal Grace, Prince Haruspex Al Fard At Tair
ordained in the Secrets of Life and Death,
is bored in the sun parlor
where merchants
show wonders
from faraway times.

He gets up,
softly applauds
to a mechanical nightingale,
bows in a refined manner
to a mechanical woman,
stops for a moment
to stare at the collection of alien gods
in big green bottles,
nods in approval to jugglers,
walks away.

SECOND

His lab is cold and half-lit.
A dissected frog
is fixed on the specimen stage,
dead for—
His Grace counts the days—
yes, for a week and a half.

Not rotten, still—
nothing rots in Iram,

though all forms
of corruption and putrescence
are customary here—
but dead for sure.

The Prince cautiously disengages the clasps,
releasing the frog,
carefully puts
the dissected amphibian
on the palm of his hand.

Looks at it indifferently.
Pulls himself together.
Looks at it with love,
slight sorrow,
and a touch of passion.

His lips, red as an open wound,
glow eerily
as he kisses
the butchered critter's mouth.

The dead frog answers
the Prince's electrifying kiss
with a twitch of his left hind leg.

His Grace contentedly smiles:
matters of life and death
are still in check.

THIRD

Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with 'Aad, Iram—who had lofty pillars?
—Quran, 89

The Everlasting City
falls once more,
turns into sand,
into fine dust

and further on—
into atoms,
into a primordial
medley
of quarks,
into shamelessly naked
singularity,
something that shouldn't be
and generally fails
to exist for a moment.

Indeed, your Lord is in observation.

For a moment, His Royal Grace
closes his stung eyes,
and in a momentary glint of sleep
Prince Haruspex is dragged through
Fiery Hell then
Frozen Hell, and
back into the Mundane Hell
of everyday routine
known to each person incoronate.

Iram indeed is gone with all its Roses.
Into the pits of Gehenna.

—Pardon me, Your Grace?
—Oh? It's nothing. Just…

Sand

—… What was that you were just saying?

His Royal Grace holds court,
bestows a blessing on his subjects,
has his picture taken
for the front page of *The Iram Chronicle,*
kisses a child—
a stillborn one—
and the child bursts into tears.

FORTH [SIC]

And thus it ends.
The everlasting city of Iram
decays into sand,
where it belongs.

The side street of Sighs,
devoid of people usually,
gets a dozen or so
by-passers.

Caravans
carrying nothing but
sand
depart
one last time.

The Herald of Fate—
a half-meter-tall lizard
with an hourglass and an oil lantern
in a worn-out robe—
declares the end.

"Cursed be eower water,
and eower chimney,
and eower very salt."

"Some truths art to stay untold,
Doors to stay unopened,
Seals to be left sealed,
And unsettling places
Never to be settled."

That's where I come in.
Grim reaper,
a gaping hole in the very fabric
of being, a void.
With grinning teeth,
as always

I take pride
in something I can't undo.

I unsheathe my sword—
its edge is sharpened into nothingness—
I unsheathe it and
bow before the royalty
whom I'd wish to spare
were it not so severe.

"Wait a bit," says His Royal Grace,
"I'm not quite ready."
I slowly nod and wait—an aeon or so,
till Prince Haruspex, eyes wide open,
walks toward me,
meets the point of my sword
with agonizing gasp,
keeps walking,
catches my head in his ermine palms,
finds my mouth,
gives me a kiss,
whispers:
"At the least
I gave it a shot."
Smiles.
Dies.

What happens then,
I remember well.
Clasp of my palm on the grip
of my sword, unclenched.
Knees bent.
Bumped
against the blood-soaked sand.
Myself curled up
with blood-soaked mouth,
making barking sounds.
Sand, wet from my eyeballs,
soaked.

Grief, grieved.
Sorrow, sorrowed.

Things to be done, done.
Things to be silenced, silenced.
Things to be mourned, mourned.
Things to be sand,
sand.

Seven Scott

Burial Details

On a cool morning of false rain,
cruel and complicit
when the low and shameless gray sky
refuses to shed tears,
our rusting spades bite chunks from the hard red clay.
We make slow but steady progress,
as if the iron earth will refuse him too.

'Bout halfway down to the Promised Land,
having buried our lifeless criticisms of incarceration,
the four of us've said nothing,
beyond weary sighs and shifty eyes
at the shoddy fit of the box of yellow pine
featuring only an ancient prisoner ID# in flat-black paint.

Of a sudden, clouds rend for a paternal sun,
peering down to impart a gentle wisdom:
at the four corners where meet
Ignorance and Knowledge, Brutality and Culture,
we will find the merciful dignity
with which to treat our honored dead.

Noses rebelling against musts of labor and mortality
upon lowering him into the cold ground,
our spades direct an onomatopoeia of dirt pattering onto the box,
lending this prisoner, this *man* his final voice—
ha-*rumpf*... ha-*rumpf*... ha-*rumpf*—
to continue in death the path he chose in life;
he who would refuse all who would refuse him.

Gary Farlow

Fragment of a Dream

A prison passage

Four layers of cement boxes,
Stacked by the waters of a creek;
Each one filled with music.

A stranger sits on my bunk,
Eating a box of tiny animals.
It is his room too.

Green beans and meatballs,
In steel boxes in hot water.
A pool of brown gravy!

I accept the filled plastic,
Slouching along the steel rails,
Collecting myself from the assortment.

I find myself in the Rec.,
Once again a disaster.
A cacophony of sounds.

The large orange ball,
Like a hurling meteor,
Gravity descending.

The plastic ball bounces,
Between wooden hands on the green table.
Someone is knocking!

A sharp diamond of light
In the middle of the dark glass.
Then, *The Cosby Show*!

Theo, are you crying?
There in the dark room in the box?
Theo, are we brothers?

Jonaki Ray

99

For T

The number of years of your sentence...
Your favorite number.
"It's lucky for me. They have to rule in my favor now."
Forget-me-nots
Your favorite flowers.
"Cuz they match my eyes, faded though they are now."
You threaded them into every cap, bootie, bag you crocheted.
Always, you asked for smokes in exchange—
Your neighbors ordered them in the next commissary.
Once you asked for a Kit Kat, excited that your daughter
would visit you. They denied her entry, and you returned to the cell
and flushed down the Kit Kat right away.
Afterward, you crocheted a dress for her, sitting up
on the lower bunk, not sleeping for a week.
Each time we met, you'd end with an "I'm so tired" breath—
You lost your appeal.
What started as an "ordinary cold"
—the prison doc diagnosing
on the kite itself that you sent requesting an X-ray—
turned into cells multiplying like the lace in your hands.
"At least, I am getting out"—you had winked
the last time we met.

Lessons in Bending

For K

At the tiniest scratch in my throat,
Ma boiled basil leaves in water,
added shredded ginger bits, crushed peppercorns,
and honey, made me drink
this mix first thing in the morning.
Here, the morning starts with the wake-up call,
"The walkway is open for 10 minutes, Ladies."
We line up in the hall to get the trays—I drink the milk, eat the toast,
and give the rest away. No one has the time to prepare
anything else for a vegetarian—sometimes, I get peanut butter
in a cup. I don't gag at the eggs-sausage-burger smell anymore.
The blue shirt tucked into pants piped with red on the sides
enshrouds me as I cut soaps and fix heels in the factory.
The pay is the highest, so I ignore
my watering-through-fumes eyes
that make the soap bars blur like large snowflakes.
The day I landed in America, the town was in the news for
"Worst snow of the season." I could understand the words
if spoken loudly and many times,
but my voice remained suspended
like the veil around my face.
They said, "Whatever you say can and will be used against you,"
when they saw the ropes and the knife and the blood.
They asked, "WHAT HAPPENED? SPEAK UP."
How could I? I had been taught my whole life
to be quiet and obey—first my parents, then my
brother, then my husband and in-laws.
At first, I used to dream I was in a movie,
and the hero would trot into the hall on a white horse,
whose hooves would mark the floor that I buffed
for three hours every day for a month, and take me away,
and I would once again dance to the *dhak-dhak*
of the *dhols* during festivals and win the Best Dancer trophy.
The rare visits I get are "Bend forward
till I can see your coochee and cough" bordered
days that make me shrivel like the tortoise back home.
I have stopped dreaming and know now
that no one will come to save me.

LaVon Johnson

A Cause for Celebration

A hanging in Northport, Alabama, 1897

Welcome to this joyful event.
Boot heels stomp
to the pulled strings
of the fiddle.

Spilt ale bridges the gaps
between pale fingers
as upturned jugs
pass in celebration.

The scent of wet leaves
and raucous laughter
fill my head.

Am I alone?

Or does the cold wet ground
only reserve these sounds
for those who are one breath
from its embrace?

My chaffed wrists are slit,
filling fast with rope fibers
and warm blood.

My throat burns
in anticipation
of the rope's turn
to place its fingers
around my neck.

The slightest movement
flakes the dried semen
of my four rapists.
Look as they kick
to the boot heel's rhythm.

I wish that was all they took.
Flakes fall as the noose's knot
brings my ear to a searing hot,
I am forced to stand
upon unstable legs.

Replaying the look on my son's face
as they did the same.
He's eight, how can he feel
shame?

His non-cry
as the knot slides
and he begins to die

gives me the strength
not to beg.
A nigger hanging
such a joyful event,

so I smile.

Kim Roberts

Two Hands

Red Onion State Prison, Virginia Department of Corrections, Pound, VA

When he raised both hands
to scratch his scalp, it looked

at first like prayer—not shackles,
not that easy way he had

of someone inured to his shackles.
The doubling of his hands

was like a double consciousness,
our visit an escape from his prison-self.

I got advance permission
for a longer visit, four hours,

since the drive took me two days
but still it was four hours

through glass, his hands
shackled for four hours. Yet still

they were graceful, still
so much *his* hands,

even constrained. The four hours
went more quickly than I expected,

so hungry was he for talk.
I almost forgot the glass, the guards

passing at regular intervals,
the high walls that blocked

all natural light, until he raised
both hands to scratch his head,

a simple gesture—as if
in silent, heavenly appeal.

Christopher Malec

Bruises

We met at Burger King… so I thought I could have us my way

If I had known you were gonna drive through more than once,
I would've made the first round a Happy Meal so that we

broke each other's lust and fell in trust
rather than the other way around

Dessert should never come first

because see, we missed some things,

or never let them out

Like how I never told you I've always hated needles

So much so,
that at the age of 26,
every time a doctor is about to stick me with one,
I still look away

Not so much out of fear as it is a disdain of being prodded by something sharper than a parent's reproachful wit

And every single time they pull the needle,

for some strange reason I return my glance to find myself slightly bruised

Which confounds me…

Because it's not so hard to find these veins which puff like speed bumps at the slightest bit of pressure applied

Not so hard as the pressure applied by you every time you were convinced I lied by the accusations of another

Yet you failed still to see the coagulation of sentiments rise above the senses
and form emotional reminisces of the times you left

Or are they the times I left? Because...

Moving at indiscriminately criminal paces
seeking financial safety that skips
the proverbial "GO" without collecting two billfolds
twice,

no wait...

three times in a row is ultimately a fault of my own,
is it not?

For that I was gifted a measure of your indifference inside a box you can't take out
As I sat...

an envelope would fall through a flap
with your name written on the back...

Written whispers hinting at visits,
more missives,
and the chances of you taking me back
every time I make it back and...

Those few times you appeared on the other side of the glass

and left handprints behind,

you kept melting my common sense and injecting me with hope...

Hope... is the lazy man's drug...

and the guilty man's religion...

I should have OD'd on the church steps

With every dose the little traces of you were often caustic,
passing through the vital moments causing emotional cotton fever,

Like
the
mother
who
left
for
five
years
and
disappeared

Like
the
other
exes
who
vacillate
in
and
out
of
fear
of
holding
on
to
a
dead
man

Like
the
homeboys
who
forget
about
me
until
someone
asks
how
I
am

Like
the
prayed-
to
God
whose
promises
weren't
kept

Until it all flowed out in a crimson rage
through a broken hope's sharp scope
and left spots on my soul, obsidian-tinted violet-blues

I'm through...

Of turning into liquid in your eyes
and falling from the dark cloud in the skies above you,

I stopped waiting for your letters, too
Instead...

I call every denial from the court a love letter
and I know you'd ask, "*Why*?"

I'd just say because Lady Justice never wants to let you go,
she'd rather hold on to you until you grow old
Till death do us part, as if that day in court,
marriage was pronounced...

She's one you'd plead and beg to pay alimony to,
to take all you have,
if only you could just leave and be free,
but she'll keep you in a recycling misery
despite the infidelity she has with two million other justified suckers

Marriage...
is an institution after all.
And leaves you with as much ambition as dog without a tail in a circular room

And so still I sit...

With a sentence longer than the sun is projected to exist,
so long ago on shooting stars
I ceased making a wish;

I'm struggling to find a space between pure existence
and cold hard dying

For lack of a better phrase, we left each
other back there, in that
phase of youth
where impulses rang truth more resonant and deafening
than the thoughts banging against the silence in these cells presently do

And in the same way I haven't here,
nor do I feel we've escaped our love...

But I'm tired of teetering on the seesaw between reminiscing

and *reality*

I've spent so much time trying to grow through this bid,
but a tree planted indoors
will eventually hit a ceiling,
I realized it
when someone once asked me what God was
and I said I wasn't dense enough to claim to know
but if one exists and created me,
then there's got to be some essence of it within myself, and I need to search
there for it...
before I look anywhere else

And I need to tap that power to extricate my soul from this derisive spell,
but I don't want hope's help

Because hope has become a needle...
and I'm tired of its bruise

Cody Carvel

Achilles and the Tortoise

Born into a family of escapees, orphaned—
parents mulliganed,
fled, deserted to the desert.

His first escape, years before
he left the family for prison,
was getting himself adopted.

Twenty years later, at the beginning
of a twenty-year sentence, including
four counts of bail jumping,

Sister Sylvia told me he would pick
me up from school. Instead, the police
showed, told me if I didn't tell them

where he was, I'd go to jail, too.
Five years under my belt, I laughed
until I cried.

Used to imagine meeting him, once-
familiar-looking Magwitch,
in a cemetery oceans away—

perhaps once more, after myself
escaping into good fortune,
newly minted gentleman child, rich

opening the door to a chatty
cockney stranger, *You're my son—*
more to me nor any son.

I've put away money,
only for you to spend.
Thereafter I only ever have seen

him in newspaper headlines,
rap sheets, too afraid to move beyond
the first few sentences—

Outlaws Terrorize Tri-State
Spelling Bee Fosters New Attitudes Among Inmates
Officers Comb Metro-Area for Escapees

Escape from confinement additional 7 yrs
Escapee Returned to Prison After 4 days
Wanted Man Breaks Handcuffs, Flees

Yet...never escaped the Dirty South.
And each time he went inside
then vanished, he stingily stole breath,

bits of a beating heart
left little pieces of himself in cells,
courthouses and scattered bits

'neath the Mason–Dixon
far from World-Famous Houdini,
King of Cuffs was amateur,

Zeno proving no
motion is possible, time
is divisible, infinitely.

Stella Wong

the hindenburg mystery

my father goes to the big house,
bigger than our home-&-kitchenette,

after he runs a man out,
butcher knife in hand:

a guest, his guess is
a sheeted ghost, airship invader.

in my mind, my father grows
bigger than a piano,

a zeppelin, or
a hunchbacked god.

i don't visit in the X or Z
number of months he's gone.

my father's fired
part-time chef & part-time waiter,

waiting now to do his time.
he wields the knife to make me

big & strong, freed my spare ribs
from their house of bone.

he runs out a man. returns all wrong,
a villain smaller than my imagination, less

factory machine than chinoiserie.
part xerox, part lizard-green

wizard of oz, full speed
ahead at the controls.

a zeppelin pilot pilots a fire hazard
as a professional

& my father's love is much
the same way. everything goes up

the fire escape. when he leaves my mother
is with child. don't ask

if he comes back. you already know that.

Tiffany Melanson

The Road to Meet You: Tomoka Correctional Institution

Brother, the highway to meet you
is full of gaping holes, the broken bodies
of green and white bottles, soiled diapers,
plastic bags filling with wind.

The heaviness of semis bear down
on my car's metal body.
I swerve in and out of traffic to avoid them
but never pass. For miles and miles
the road stretches and bleeds.

In the McDonald's where I stop for coffee,
every brown body looks me in the eyes:
the white-haired grandmother
when I move aside so she can pass,
the cashier when I smile and take my coffee.
Her hands linger like the feelers of an insect.

In the parking lot I open the window
to smell the pine air mix with the scent
of wet earth. A hungry tongue of hot steam
hovers across the asphalt.

Everyone knows just up the road the prison sits waiting
to swallow every brown body whole.

Check-in: Tomoka Correctional Institution

His letter said, *Get there early.*
The line is long. Wait.
Stop to watch the steam rise from the metal teeth
of the razor wire on the fence, like breath.

Wives check their makeup
as they pace. Fathers in dirty jeans
smoke cigarettes to bare knuckles.
A mother in a headscarf holds a child
whose face you can't see. She sees you
watching and says, "She buries herself
like the dead."

His letter said, *Only bring what you need.*
Place your clear plastic bag on the table.
Identify the contents one item at a time:
State of Florida driver's license,
two twenty-dollar bills.

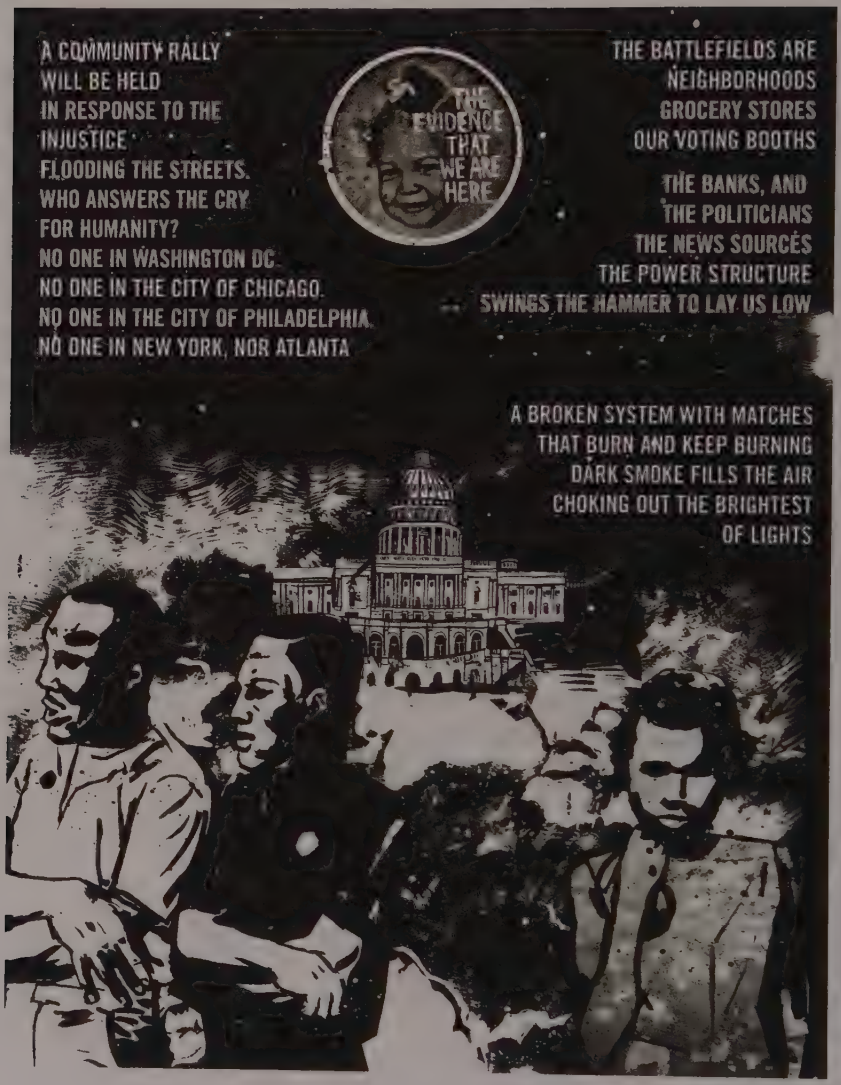
Ma'am, do you have a firearm,
drugs or drug-related paraphernalia,
anything that could be used as a weapon
by an inmate at any time?

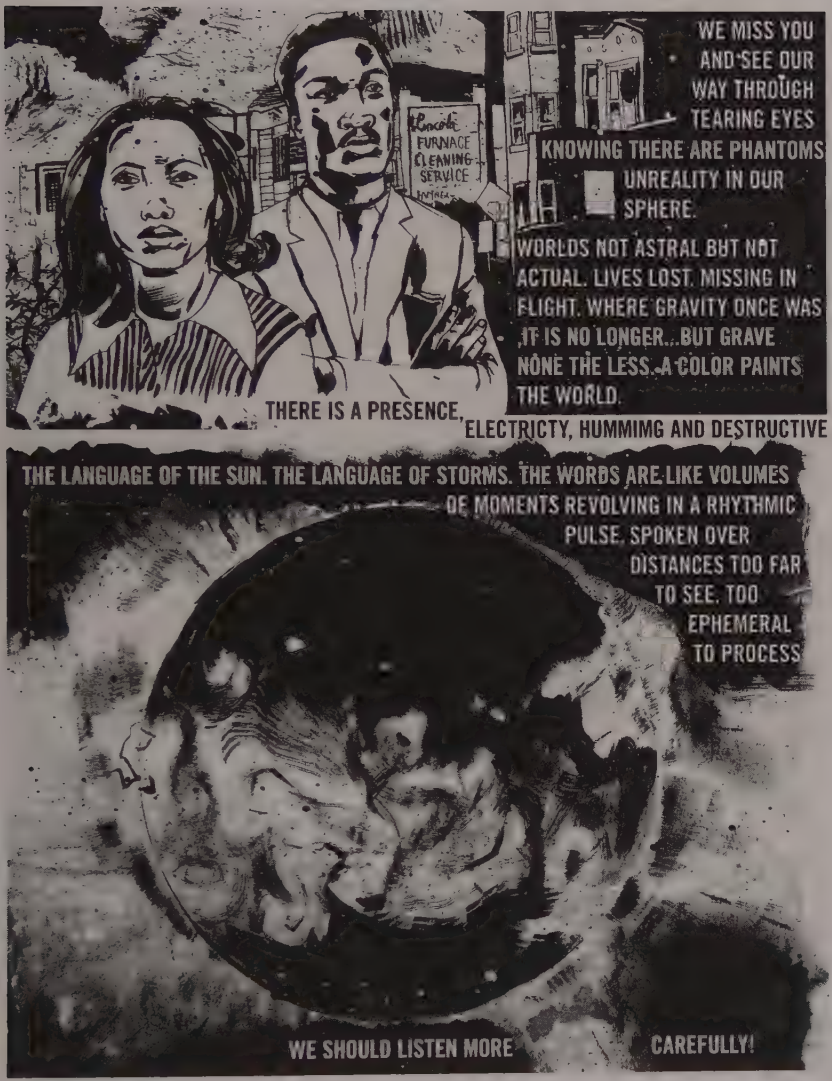
You have the memory
of your older brother's nineteen-year-old face,
the lit match of your collective anger,
your shared father's close-set eyes and easy smile,
a twenty-five-year-old bruise
in your hand from the last time
you touched him.

When instructed, follow
the C.O. into a sterile room. Raise your hands
to allow her gloved hand under the folds
of your sagging breasts.

While you wait, close your eyes:
inside you is a prison full of brothers, waiting
to touch your face, to tell you in person,
It wasn't our fault.

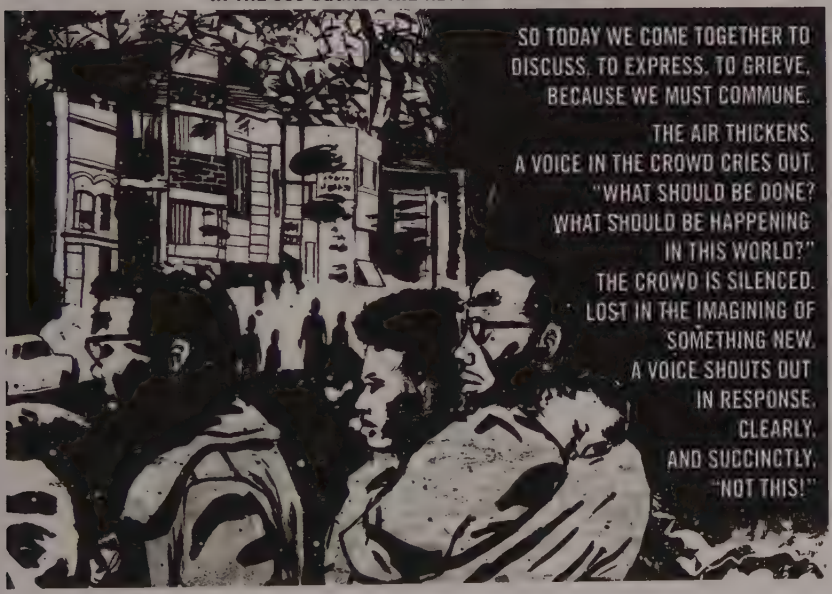
The Evidence That We Are Here




FURNACE
CLEANING
SERVICE
WE MISS YOU AND SEE OUR WAY THROUGH TEARING EYES KNOWING THERE ARE PHANTOMS UNREALITY IN OUR SPHERE.
WORLDS NOT ASTRAL BUT NOT ACTUAL. LIVES LOST. MISSING IN FLIGHT. WHERE GRAVITY ONCE WAS IT IS NO LONGER...BUT GRAVE NONE THE LESS. A COLOR PAINTS THE WORLD.
THERE IS A PRESENCE,
ELECTRICTY, HUMMIMG AND DESTRUCTIVE
THE LANGUAGE OF THE SUN. THE LANGUAGE OF STORMS. THE WORDS ARE LIKE VOLUMES OF MOMENTS REVOLVING IN A RHYTHMIC PULSE. SPOKEN OVER DISTANCES TOO FAR TO SEE. TOO EPHEMERAL TO PROCESS
WE SHOULD LISTEN MORE
CAREFULLY!

HORRIFIC
THE FREQUENCY
IS ASTOUNDING
POLICE
CHICAGO
PATHWAYS DESIGNED.
DELIBERATELLY SCATTERED.
THE RESULTS OVER TIME.
CHAOTIC. WITNESS ABUSE
AFTER ABUSE.
TOO
PERSISTENT
TO IGNORE
DISBELIEF
IS UNBELIEVABLE

IN THE 360 DEGREE THE RETURN IS INEVITABLE



Pamela Cochran

Poesy

It's the wail of the wounded; forsaken—
a burden, but for the breaks between
the lines. The blood shed, beautifully
inked onto the page, purged by the channel
of tears. It's the battle between flesh
and spirit, victory claimed by the banner
of surrender.

It's embracing the truth of the scar;
releasing the shame owned by the self
with whom you're no longer acquainted.
It's breaking the chains and shaking
that gorilla off your back, picking up the
pieces and patching the holes in your
heart. It's the wonder of discovering
strength in the moments of weakness,
comfort in the unbearable truth.

It's forbidding rage to dictate
anything more than the pressure
of the point on the page. It's sharing the
secrets we can't afford to keep,
displaying the profound irrationality of
our thought processes; giving the
madness a voice when we refuse to
listen to the silence.

It's the blueprints for our hopes and
dreams. It chronicles the attempts of
the adversary and the tales of courage.
It's that what you see in the rearview is
the only hope for the future.

Greed

I would never have believed
that I'd awake one day
in a lonely cell, having stripped
myself of everything precious
that I'd always taken for granted
by shaking a fist at my creator
for ending the suffering of my beloved
in a way other than I'd imagined while
on my knees;
awaiting transport
to a place no one belongs, except
to the state, whose
main concern is the bottom line; bodies
for which they receive top dollar,
but never humans, never
souls, never mothers whose lives have been nothing
more than a series of tragic events,
and are now doomed to
walk this journey
through the wilderness with
no prophet to lead, no
cloud by day or
fire by night to prevent
the aimless wander
of the hopelessly exhausted, desperate
to be anywhere but here;
or destined—
and placed, precisely
on this map,
at this point—
a testament
that it doesn't have to end
here, that life's treasure
chest of grace, hope,
and redemption
can be uncovered if we
don't
stop
digging.

V. Ruiz

In a dream my dead Tío tells me he's happy

For Tiwi

We're driving along looking for an all-night bar
and I remember no one else but him, and how we laughed,
how he stuck his head out the window
and howled. And in the dream neither one of us
talked about our love/hate relationship with tequila
or how we both had a tendency to sprout fangs
at a single mirada. Didn't matter if the eyes were
fans or jealous. When we found the bar
we walked inside and I said, *Wait,*
I have people I want you to meet! I said
They gotta see you now, like this. And my Tío said he
just wanted it to be him and I for a while, like this,
where I could see his face only lit by neon,
where his eyes weren't crazed, weren't blocked
by metal bars or a glass wall, where his voice
wasn't crackled by static and a phone line, but smooth
marbles with mountains and forests inside, and all
that damn glimmering brown. So we smoked some mota
and chilled. We talked shit about the DJ and said,
This music's too mellow.
Neither one of us wanted to make any requests or ripple
any change. But after some time
the red warm of the room was making me think
about things like love and holding hands and I told my Tío
I had a man he needed to meet. But all he said was *Mija, you go.*
I gotta stay here a while longer. But te amo, he said as I left,
leaving him behind on a red velvet couch, chillin with a joint,
and clouds pillowing his head.

Smoke Clouds

You said you discovered meth in the cells.
The world inside's got no time, it's all just colder
and darker, you said. Everything we use to escape
out here is much more needed when
the only company you have is scratches in the gray

counting down a release. When you count days by
the black that consumes you and the wails in the night.
Out here the city didn't trust you and what you'd seen.

The days you were released were always celebrations
for everyone but you. Everyone who thought it a startover
and you couldn't help but ask, *When did the other life end?*
Everyone wanted to know where you would make a living,

where you would spend your time and how many AA classes
you were willing to attend. They wanted to know what you
would do to change. No one asked you how they could help.
No one asked you what the world felt like after living in all those walls.

Once you told me, *The sky is brighter, the sun's hot as hell, and each*
of these fucking white bulbs is just a reminder. Your hija is the same
age as me and she's wandering around the world like my hija,
wondering what it means to have a felon for a father, wondering
how theft and drugs can mark a man for life.

Tim Casarez

Old Songs

Old songs carry suitcases.
And decades.
Visit from a time
Where life
Didn't matter much.
A time with no foresight
Or appreciation for the little things.
I was there
On the underside
Of an overcast
Gray sky
Walking Nowhere
Hands in pockets
My eyes
In the dirt.
A younger guy
And it hurt.
Because I never saw this far
Ahead.
Never saw myself
So behind.
Was I closing my eyes
Or just stupid?
I was there
In my ex-girlfriend's room
The sound of clothes
Going into a duffle bag
Playing through the speakers.
I was headed Nowhere
And those bags found me here.
Too bad songs can't
Change the past.
Change direction.
If they could I would
Point my feet toward
Resurrection.
I wouldn't be typing this today.
At least not in this way.
I wouldn't have forgotten
what it's like to get up

And walk
Wherever I want.
Be able to eat
With nobody
Watching me.
Did I notice it then:
The freedom I had
To be
Or do anything?
I just hope
The next suitcase
Will find me Somewhere.
We'll see—in ten years.

Michael Torres

My Brother Is Asking for Stamps

And photos. Photos of me and my
new wife. He's asking for pictures
of the wedding. He's very sorry
he couldn't make it. He can't wait
to meet her. My brother is asking
if I can call a warehouse office
in Albuquerque and tell them Ray
(his cellie) is fine, and that Ray
would like his old job back, one day,
if possible. My brother is asking
for paper, asking for postage stamps,
and for a few dollars on his JPay. It's June,
it's July. He says it's not so bad in here,
says he's not getting institutionalized,
won't get institutionalized, not like
the others. He has TV. He reads. A lot.
My brother is asking for book 5, 6, or 12
of the Women's Murder Club Series.
It's May. It's March. It's May. It's October.
Happy Halloween, Brother. He's asking,
again, for postage stamps, telling me
he might be programmed, sure, but
who isn't? We all need routine, he says
that one time, after chow, they let
the guys stay out a little longer
and the guys looked at each other like
why aren't we being locked down yet?
My brother says he's a confused mouse
sometimes. Sometimes he won't go out
for rec, can't stand the fact that it's going
to end. It's June. It's July. Happy Birthday,
Brother. My brother is asking for stamps,
he's ending every letter with a cartoon
of himself, all homeboyed out,
even though he wasn't like that before.
It's like he's grown an extra life in there
and the Him I grew up knowing is closed
until not-this August. I know I shouldn't
imagine him this way. But I will always be
younger and looking up. That's my brother,

he's asking for stamps.
Outside, the leaves
have turned without notice. It is the week
when every walnut seems to be falling
from the sky, and every time I drive home
I run as many over as possible. It's June.
Happy Birthday. It's November. My brother
says he'll write when he can, he knows
I'm busy. Everyone's busy. It's August.
It's August, and he's looking for stamps.

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Because My Brother Knows Why They Call Them "County Blues," but Won't Tell Me Why

When my brother left, I painted our room
blue to make a more manageable sky. But

the room couldn't mean anything besides
an offering of endless daylight for the parade

of shadows and the solitude shadows purchase
by virtue of their existence. Besides,

I only needed something collapsible, a place
for me to collect some quiet. And my thoughts

became clouds, just like in cartoons.
Where was I? Yes, the blue became the room

and prepared a silence of its own. For all the trees.
I planted them. In pots. And the birds defecting

from the old sky we left behind were welcomed
like the rest of us. Of course, the original sky

grew jealous, wouldn't you? Ultimatums were set,
sides chosen; each faction manufactured bigger

and bigger speakers. Volume knobs turned to 10.
Then, walls of roar. I don't care who won. Really.

I'm not a good liar. I've been looking for the perfect
metaphor for sadness. All along. I apologize

for nothing. I sit with my sadness, desperate
to relieve its weight. It's not as easy as everyone

makes it seem. I tried to cover my tracks. I only
encountered a variety of distant stares, all the fog

a morning could muster, entering with its fleeting
charm. So many rainy windows, and the calls

of birds no one ever sees. This is the end
everyone hates: the main character wakes up.

Don't worry. This is a poem. But I'm not the speaker.
The speaker is the speaker. His brother is not

my brother leaving, being called to a different sky,
another room, everything turning blue and bedlam behind him.

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Jennifer DeMott

"Tina"

the drive
the arrival
the void
the purpose
the nose
the sting
the euphoria
the shakes

the hours
the desire
the anticipation
the bill
the wall
the burn
the laughter
the shower

the distance
the hotel
the exchange
the table
the darkness
the limbs
the bed
the guilt

Forgotten

Like cream skimmed off
the top—
foam
running
down the sides and I
am left,
rich residue
wasted
at the bottom
just to be
wiped up later
and suddenly
nobody
knows
where
I
am.

Nina Sitlingten

The Cycle

This walk is a dance
It says
We made it, kid
Free
Political refugees
Let me show you
Where you come from
A scar on my belly
Jagged lines on my breast
You almost killed me, you know?
I would've given anything
For you to be everything
I never get to be
I gave you my heart
Blood-red ink
Engraved on my chest
Crossed myself
Made a pact with God
To give my last breath
I covered your eyes
To blind you
From pretend
Cardboard
Cutouts
Posing as mothers
Burned baby dolls
Gave you birth control
Because my daughter
Is more than a single mother
In a world with no men
More than a welfare check
I told you the truth
About the boys' locker room
They'll all run from you now
Or run to you afraid
That's powerful
We are not average women
Your memories
Will be different from mine
Open my closet

Take a look for yourself
The skeleton with the welts
And bloody legs
I've held onto it for years
My mother gave it to me
This one is from your father
It was all that he left
My father gave me one, too
I got rid of it though
Once I realized
They were both the same
Those things are years away
They've gone before us
Lost photo albums
Heart-shaped lockboxes
We're something new
Unlocked silent lips
Tearless eyes and unscarred skin
You can dream now
I'll watch over you
While you sleep

John Radford

Bone

Framed in doorway
crumpled in Buddha shape
complected of another race

Indeed, you traveled far

Gift to yourself
at great price
to your Mother

Cellmate woke
to you ajar
and gone

You paved
his rough road:
Suspicion
Accusation
Unanswerable
Question

But you hung six feet
from sleeping men

Seems indecent:
could not get
away to get
away

Bury Christmas
with dope-line
choke-line Bury
Christmas for the boys
next door Bury Christmas
You Old Boy and bury it
once more

C.A. McAllister

Meanwhile, Under Colorado ...

An homage to the work of Geri X

A trillion tons of rock & time;
a mountain of consequence and corruption;
a crushing weight, especially at first.
I got used to it.

Thoughts, like water, well up from the core,
gnawing, chewing, eroding
caverns in the stone;
inner worlds to be explored ...

Slowly ... hours pass over me;
individual grains of sand, gouging tiny channels,
re-shaping me.
Scars spread, a second skin.

Time & Hope: nothing to me. Best let them be.
Soul & Spirit: priceless gems of who I am—
precious liabilities;
safely subducted beneath Mind ... and Mind breaks ...

Free ...

While the mountain has its way with what remains,
while the whole luminous world
spins along ...
oblivious ...

We feel the sky ... receding.
The distance between us ... thickening.
And we forget each other:
things we'll no longer see.

Vanquished within the unforgiving wait,
we change.
Twenty trips around the star. Until,
day seven thousand three hundred and twenty-three ...

When we stir, inside. Our sentence, suddenly unsettled...
The trillion tons of rock & time have shifted...
Air, sucked fresh from the living world;
tainted with the scent of... possibilities...

Mind returns.
Soul & Spirit emerge.
And we breathe...
Deeply.

Time & Hope rip into us.
Rending agony, beyond imagination.
Time has eaten much,
but it's hope that hurts the worst.

As dreams & desires become
like cancer;
Mind, Soul & Spirit devour each other.
Beneath the State, Hope is cannibalistic.

For in the dark we see:
luculent shadows of the sun and stars...
And Soul screams and Spirit yells: oh the light!
That's where we live! Dig! Dig! There it is! Please! Please dig!

But Mind—recoils.
"This cannot be."
"We have no faith in Hope. Hope betrays us every time."
But they thrash & writhe & wine & plead!!!

So Mind whips them
until they still.
Submitting them to logic. Suppressing them to wisdom.
Mind reminding them that Mind is free, no matter, our body rots.

"Stay away from Hope. Its dangerous.
Here, you like to paint. Try writing some poetry."
And they simmer down, express themselves,
and play...

While Mind watches over them, flawed guardian…
and digs…
Creating a passage that might, one day, give them back the sky.
Rock & time resettle, heavier and lighter than before.

Then, on day seven thousand eight hundred and seventy-five…
The worm-infested mountain
shifts,
again.

The second wave of Hope,
the human world,
so long withheld,
crashes into us.

A streaming tide of music,
submerging us in crystal-clear emotion;
washing away logic, muddying up wisdom.
Mind, Soul & Spirit dissolve… back into one…

And I'm whole again!
And I sing!
And, in the echo of my voice…
A stranger.

Every song turned,
eulogy
upon eulogy
upon eulogy.

Each filled with such desperate longing,
rising like the tide,
swelling like the ocean
that aches to bathe the moon…

And I feel EVERYTHING.
Scraping me raw
against the stone.
With every return of my inner gaze…

I can taste, smell & touch the loved and the lost inside my head
and the songs like acid pour into my chest and I'm suffocating—
I cannot breathe—despair is erasing me and I want to love
again but I'm so spectacularly alone…

And now that we are me again,
there's no one but me
to save myself…

And I'm so very tired…
With nothing
to hold onto
its easy to let go…

Until a voice, unique in all the world,
I think,
envelopes me.
I can feel the familiar
persona of a woman…
Refracted & reflected,
so perfectly crafted.

A siren of salvation calling
from above the waves.
Uplifting with her falling pitch.
Elegant with contradictions.

An ink-stained songbird with a broken wing.
Lyrics
aged & charred in oak and nicotine.
Fret-scarred fingers lacing me with strings.

So mesmerizing, this
classically trained masochist, exhibitionist, submissive,
achieving emotional liberation as
the monogamous main attraction at
a narcissistic orgy
exclusively
open to the public.

Such a poignant distillation
of the girly-brain:
yearning to be completely understood, treasured, and respected,
while longing to be routinely plundered, possessed, and beyond redemption.

But, I have no idea who she really is,
so I like to assume she's sincere;
singing of what was, wished or
might never be...

Whoever she might be.
I reach deep into her
expressions,
as deep as I can go.

And let her expose me to the storm,
to wash my Soul & Spirit clean
so I can dream
of dreams again.

And it burns me, hurts me,
exquisitely like:
a jagged seed of molten glass thrust, fingers & tongue
into my heart, my cherished wound, where it grows...

Feeding on memory, invading, spreading into me...
Ripping, tearing, bursting through...
Arrogant blossom of ruin—
I drink from you.

Lapping feeling,
injecting meaning,
so empty-sweet
narcotic thick.

Like every kiss
I never kissed
raked across
my breathless lips.

Oh how I've missed this!

Dear God: fuck life without this!
I must hold onto this:
relentless, restless rhythmic hunger;
love & nothing at war in my chest;
sucking vacuum, spraying warmth;
blood swirled with honey—
every time you cut me—
my flex-fuel heart pumps both.
Pumps both.
Pumps. Both.
Pumps...
Both...

(inhale deeply)

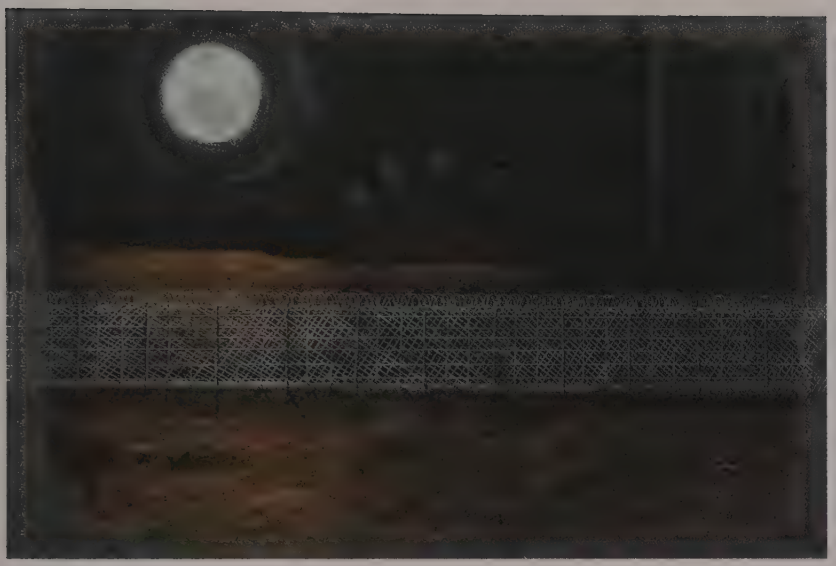
As the last note falls,
the murmur of rock & time
nestles around me...
Except...

Through a path
I've dug in the rubble...

I see the moon.

And I've never been
so intimately alone
as I am
when I'm with you.

Gergana Petrova Micheva,
or Geri—as you like it,
from one killer
to another,
I just thought
you'd like to know.



Artwork by the author. *Meanwhile, Under Colorado...*, 2018. Acrylic on paper. 12 × 18 inches.

Cyrus Armajani

Home

They handcuff me even though they already cut off my hands.

They throw me off a bridge. The bridge is not at fault.

They feed me sand. Now I know the meaning of thirst.

They want to find a weapon, a new weapon, to kill me and they want me alive so they can cuff me.

They want to kill me and they want me alive so they can throw a bridge on me.

I am not unique. They are not special.

I saw the police arrest a boy for riding his bike on a sidewalk.

I saw the mayor at the parade. It's not important that the mayor was dancing with MC Hammer.

I saw the mayor at Greek Fest is irrelevant.

I saw the police arrest a boy for a guitar case.

I asked for a job. They gave me a library card.

I asked for my mom. They gave me a coupon for a public defender.

I asked for home. They handed me a BART ticket.

I asked for a teacher. They cut off my hands.

I'm so tired this is only the beginning.

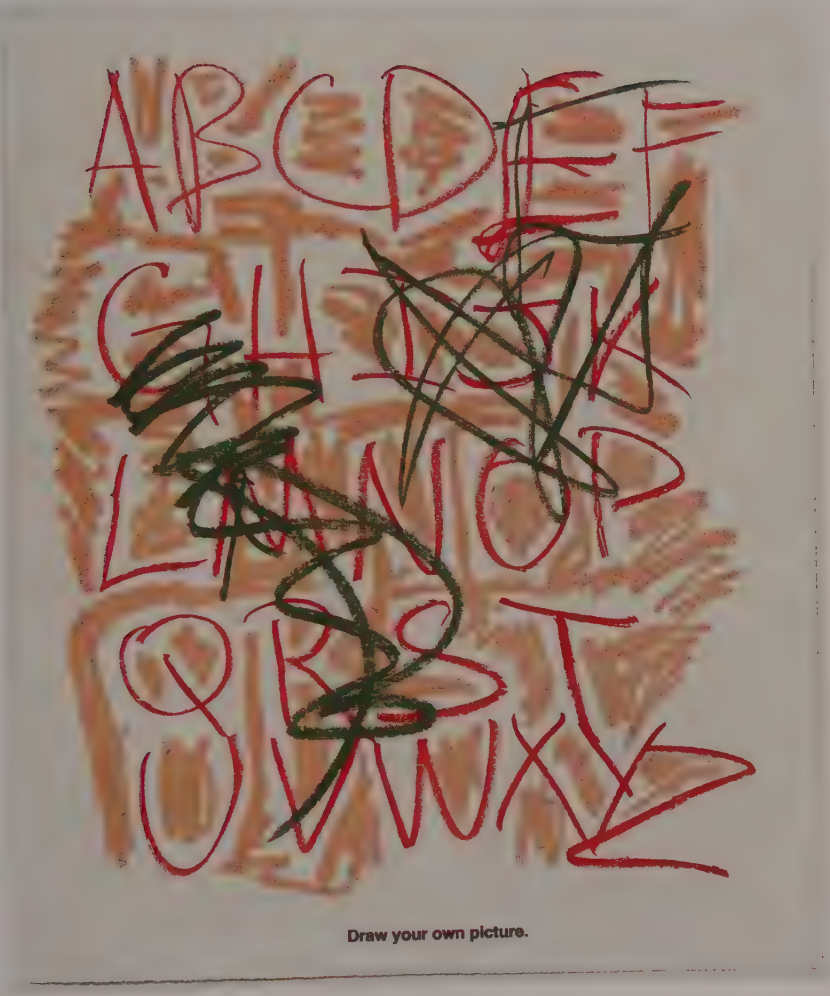
Sable Elyse Smith

From "Coloring Book Series"

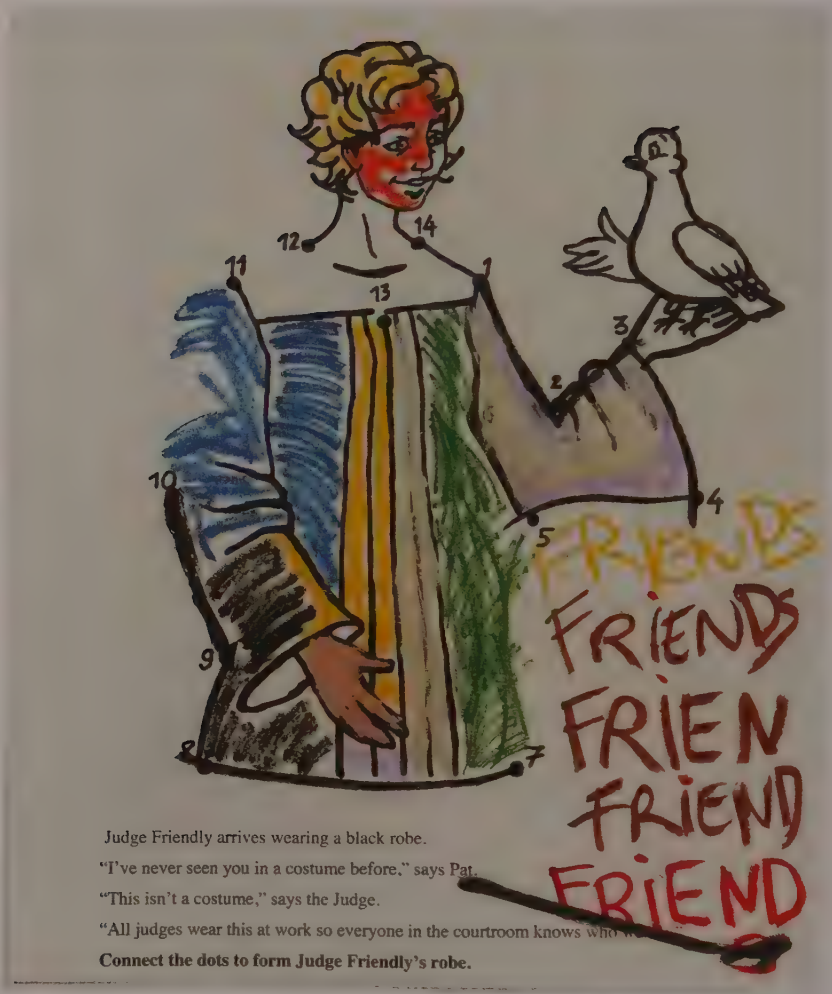
Together, Pat and Judge Friendly ride directly to upstairs to a big room with benches. Lots and lots of people are waiting.
"It is hard to wait," says Judge Friendly.
"There are many families here, so we hope that everyone brings something to read or quiet puzzles to work on."
What 10 things don't belong in this picture?

Coloring Book 13, 2018. Screen printing ink, oil pastel, and oil stick on paper. 60.25 × 56 inches. All photos by Charles Benton. All images courtesy of the artist, JTT, New York, and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

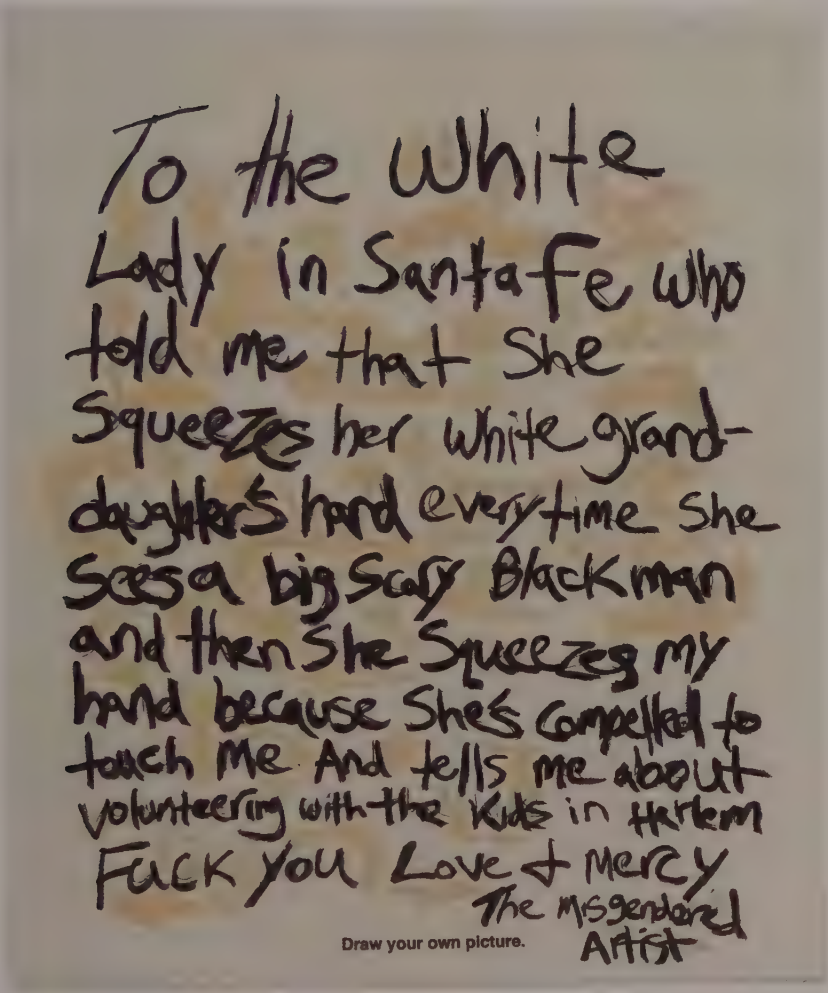
Coloring Book 16, 2018. Screen printing ink, graphite, and oil stick on paper. 60.25 × 56 inches



Coloring Book 17, 2018. Screen printing ink and oil stick on paper. 60.25 × 56 inches


Judge Friendly arrives wearing a black robe.
"I've never seen you in a costume before," says Pat.
"This isn't a costume," says the Judge.
"All judges wear this at work so everyone in the courtroom knows who
Connect the dots to form Judge Friendly's robe.
FRIENDS
FRIENDS
FRIEN
FRIEND
FRIEND

Coloring Book 18, 2018. Screen printing ink, oil pastel, and oil stick on paper. 60 × 50 inches


To the White
Lady in Santa Fe who
told me that She
Squeezes her white grand-
daughters hand every time She
sees a big Scary Black man
and then She Squeezes my
hand because She's compelled to
touch me And tells me about
volunteering with the Kids in Harlem
Fuck You Love & Mercy
The Misgendered
Artist
Draw your own picture.

Coloring Book 21, 2018. Screen printing ink, graphite, white out, and oil stick on paper. 60 × 50 inches

Hussain Ahmed

Wi-Fi in a Prison Yard

I tear up my heart into wigs of slivers
that I may remember how it all began.

there was an eclipse and I misplaced my eyes
to the blood in the moon, a miscarriage of everything I owned.

I am sick of the nostalgia that comes with a stale memory
of what I should have seen, before the darkness.

we find connections on the lines on our palms and they become entangled
into edible nests, until a new inmate begins to cry.

this globe is full of darkness
and the only lit places are burning.

the fire punctured the ozone that blankets the verdin in my rib cage.
My heart is a wick of card sliver, it spins in a pool of grief.

Connie Leung

Allegiance

I can hear our mother
through the plywood door
of my brother's room
separating them
from the rest of the household
I am careful
to not creak the hinges
that guard their sacred space

he giggles jovially
and I imagine him
wrapped in the same
peach comforter
mother sleeps in
clapping his hands
and clasping his mouth
to catch sighs of wonder
and awe

mother retells him stories
of magical kingdoms
ruled by a Monkey King
my brother dreams
of pulling out tufts of his own hair
and blowing them into the wind
transforming each strand into a minion
he'll huff orders
that command his might
and righteousness
and mother will be proud

daddy startles me
lifts me into the air
untangling my body
from the cold
crevice of the doorframe
and secures me with calloused
arthritic hands
into his heart
my ear

still firmly pressed against my scalp
is red and numb
and aches
to reattach to mother's voice
she hasn't gotten to the part
in the story
where there's room for one more

daddy's footsteps
bounce me on the round of his belly
where I've rubbed
and patted in jubilee
throughout my childhood
but tonight
there is no magic hidden
in there for me
no conquerable land or faithful servants
to prove my worth
only cabbage
steamed fish
rice
and chilled beer

his white tee now clings to him
in wet patches of gray
at the shoulder as he
cradles us
into his worn
leather La-Z-Boy
his inaudible words
attempt to instill meaning
and resilience in me
while I try desperately to find
the monkey in his story
past the hardship
and sorrow
and despair

Anything you want...
you have to get it
through the blood of your own hands.

and with that
his story ends
my longing
his words
blown into the wind
beside one another
in allegiance
his steady breath
lulls me to sleep
on his chest
wrapped in his arms
where it's warm

Autumn in Prison

In memory of John Fowle

these leaves are not from in here
they are nothing like the towering pine
that prickles crevices into my sky with its
decaying and sullen branches

these leaves are robust & hearty still
sneaking their way onto a stage
of concrete like renegade
prima donnas at burlesque
they dance and flicker
bare glimpses of saffron & sepia
blow kisses from lips a tint of rouge
i am certain
no man can recreate

these leaves must be
the ones you saw each day
as you sat close by painting
they huddled together didn't they
and danced harmoniously
as they fanned rainbows into your sky
i create a story in my mind of how
you must've smiled and pressed
those rose-kissed cheeks toward your eyes

but your leaves are changing in here
as all the fallen do
i watch as one little ballerina races by
unable to keep pace
she collides into a steel wall
half her body in my company
half her body reaching for you

her slippers tear in the struggle
i whisper to her *you're still beautiful*
and tell her *you should go*
she twirls her head blushing
then exposes her drying heart toward me

she waits for me to come for her
she waits for us
to save each other

First published by *The Margins*, the digital magazine of the Asian American Writers' Workshop. © 2018 Connie Leung. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Durlene Westfall

Fate

That which has become
that which is still becoming
and that which is owed.

VISUAL

Art gives the artist another language, another tool to fight for freedom.

Sarah Ross

Sarah Ross

Imagining the Radical Beauty of Freedom

No change for the good ever happens without it being imagined first, even if that change seems hopeless or impossible in the present.
—Martín Espada

Artists incarcerated in prisons have frequently told me that making art was like encountering an unlocked door—art provided a momentary way out from the confines of state control. During long days, where tedious rules organize life and boredom is punishing, artists were able to scratch out a line or mix a color that could breathe a little air into the small cells that lock up so many people across this nation at shameful rates. Making art doesn't necessarily change the material conditions of prison, but it can change psychic ones. Art gives the artist another language, another tool to fight for freedom. For the first time in fifteen years of working with artists in Illinois prisons, I have started to hear a different story, one of despair and fatigue. With COVID-19 raging in congregate living spaces, of which prisons are prime hot spots, artists, poets, and, indeed, all people locked behind fences and walls are on the edge. In many prisons, people have been on constant lockdown for more than six months, stuck in a six-by-eight-foot cell with another person for twenty-three to twenty-four hours a day. Those filing petitions for clemency and writing to state governors aim for an urgent priority—the hope of escaping premature death. The stress of living in a box can only ever exceed its tight boundaries.

As COVID-19 exposes the genocidal mix of permanent confinement coupled with lack of decent healthcare, people (some of them formerly incarcerated) who marched in the streets over the last year are rightfully enraged by the deaths of so many Black and Brown people at the hands of police. This moment has been primed for decades by activists, artists, poets, educators, attorneys, currently and formerly incarcerated people, and so many others, who intimately know the crisis of incarceration and have centered an abolitionist vision—a practice of freedom. As the activist, curator, and critic Mariame Kaba tells us:

> All of the most important and impactful social transformations happened because people fought and struggled for things they had never seen. Prison industrial complex abolition demands imaginative work and is rooted in building another world.

The writing and art in this issue meets that demand by looking back at the historical frameworks that make prisons possible, and dreaming forward to imagine a world in which we all thrive.

When Joshua Bennett, Tara Betts, and I started on this issue in 2017, both a global health pandemic and ideas of abolition were not yet featured prominently in the news or discussed at dinner tables. While artists, poets, musicians, and other cultural workers have, for decades, been educating us to witness and organize against the expansive net of the carceral system, we were cautioned that our ideas of abolition might be too political for *Poetry* and its readers. Questions about the *risk* of publishing the poetry of people locked up, no matter their crime, weighed down the conversations. We insisted that the poetry and art by people who are convicted of a crime, but are also criminalized for being poor, Black, Brown, Indigenous, women, survivors of abuse and sexual violence, survivors of gun violence, under educated and/or from America's most divested neighborhoods, is a necessary power of culture that we need. Now, US cultural institutions are being called on (once again) to rethink and evaluate their role in supporting (*or not*) the poetry that calls out white supremacist violence, the song that sings a melody of radical restructuring and the images that give shape to a more beautiful future. In that work is an emphatic critique of policies that shape the lives of poor people and communities of color in the US; testimony to loss of family and friends to state violence; resistance to degrading conditions of prisons and a radical insistence for human dignity. In that work the reverberations of change are felt in the body and on the streets. Of the thousands of poems submitted to this issue of *Poetry*, common words written over and over again tell the realities of a legal system that maintains racial and class segregation. *Pain, longing, new slaves, New Jim Crow, midnight hours, brother, sister, mother,* and *enough* are words that repeated across the pages. And yet because they were written we can imagine that they also echo that change, saying *we are still here, we are alive, we are surviving.*

The visual work in this issue reflects and expands those ideas with deft craft and content. The images here give shape and texture to the poetry throughout this issue. In the way that poetry, Audre Lorde says, gives "name to the nameless so it can be thought," the art makes visible people and sentiments who were meant to be disappeared. Each featured artist has intimate relationships with what Beth Richie terms the "prison nation" (meaning both the existence of carceral spaces such as detention centers, prisons, secured half-way houses, and the ideological frameworks that produce criminalization, segregation, and confinement), they are either educators in prison classrooms, family or friends of people locked up, or artists who are themselves incarcerated.

One artist and poet, Margaret Burroughs (1915–2010), spent decades visiting people and teaching in Pontiac and Stateville prisons in Illinois. She told people in prison to treat their cells as their studios. When William Jones, then incarcerated on death row in Illinois, met her, he remembered that she said,

> My son, do you know you are a descendant of great Kings; you are someone and I love you. Now get to your work station and write me a poem. I will be back the third Sunday of next month and you have to have something for me.

Her time with people—crossing the physical boundaries of walls and resisting the ideological narratives of throw-away populations—left a deep mark on the lives of people in those two prisons. In his own way, artist Devon Daniels, who is currently incarcerated at Stateville prison, pays homage to Burroughs through an immaculate pencil drawing. Self-taught while incarcerated, Daniels often creates portraits of his creative heroes, like Burroughs and artist Kerry James Marshall, people he looks to for inspiration from inside a prison cell. The economy of his pencil is on full display, as Daniels ekes out a fierce beauty and clarity with one of the simple tools allowed to artists inside. Without artists and poets like Burroughs, who spend their time negotiating art supplies with prison staff or convincing guards that artistic marks are not gang symbols, artists in prison would surely still make art. But, as in all creative practices, having a community to challenge and deepen aesthetic practices makes the work that much more visible and urgent.

Everyday life in prison is captured in the work of Lawrence Dantzler-Bey in *Arrested Development*. A chess game and stack of books—a Bible, a novel, and an investing book—are some things that take up time in a space where no Internet and few programs exist. While the scene might express an everyday, anywhere-ness to it, the orange striped pants, chained picnic table, and barbed wire in the distance remind us that prison *really does arrest*—perpetual punishment tightly organizes time and controls space. Manuel Antonio Gonzalez III's and Flynard (Fly-1) Miller's depictions of prison cells reconfirm this fact. Both artists render their cells as skewed and distorted. How can the artist even observe a space that is too up close to see, a place designed to distort and distress the perceptive senses? One answer is emblazoned on the wall in Miller's work: "Buried."

A similar kind of up-closeness is found in the work of Frank Perfetti's *Machine* series. With some thirty black and white abstractions developed over sixteen years, the artist creates meticulously drawn, nonsensical machines using templates and a T-square alongside freehand drawing. The intricate shapes and lines suggest the machine has a purpose, but like the criminal legal system, small details create a dense, complex puzzle that few find their way out of without expensive legal assistance.

The trappings of violence and incarceration ripple through other images in this section. Amber Wilson's *The Cheater* centers a large eye hung over a series of cartoon-like land- and cityscapes. This all-seeing eye traps: barbed lashes enclose a detailed iris where abstracted figures float around a maze. The maze surrounds a spinning table saw blade that frames a black pupil. Inside the pupil, a figure is now in small parts: a ghostly head, arm and hand,

brain and heart. Cryptic details throughout Wilson's work are delivered with soft pastels, suggesting lightness to what is most certainly a heavy weight. A similar color scheme is deployed in Carole Alden's *Hollow where my soul lives*. Alden was a sculpture/installation artist before being incarcerated for defending herself from an abusive partner. While in prison, her work as an artist continued, albeit with different materials and little space. In this work, the clean flesh of an arm is pulled back to reveal cold rods, as a cold-blooded animal, the snake, weaves through the rods, fingers, and wrist of the limb. Here the prison is the body; the poison of entrapment is made corporal.

Other works in this issue picture life outside of prison, a reminder of the radical beauty of freedom. In SH Hendley's *Father's Responsibility*, we are dropped into a household scene. A couple embraces as a child holds one shoe up to her parents. The father points up, eyes closed as if in a state of prayer, perhaps just thankful to be with those who care about him. In Christopher M. Campos's work, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, we are one step removed as we encounter a scene through a torn photograph. Two young men look back at us: they are on the go, perhaps on a road trip, with an itinerary posted nearby. Their mobility is a quintessential metaphor for American freedom, even if it is drawn from the confines of a cell.

By contrast, figures are firmly rooted in *Three Feet High and Rising* by Flying Spaghetti. Their movement is in the twists and turns of braiding hair, an art form and connection of care that is passed down intergenerationally. These women look directly at us. Their gaze locks with ours in a kind of mutuality, similar to that of *LaTrice* by Armand. Latrice wears the ribbon for cancer survivors. In the script above her head, the artist reminds her that a greater power will hold her together. The hope that someone/something will hold her in a time of need is palpable because the artist, locked away in America's prisons, cannot.

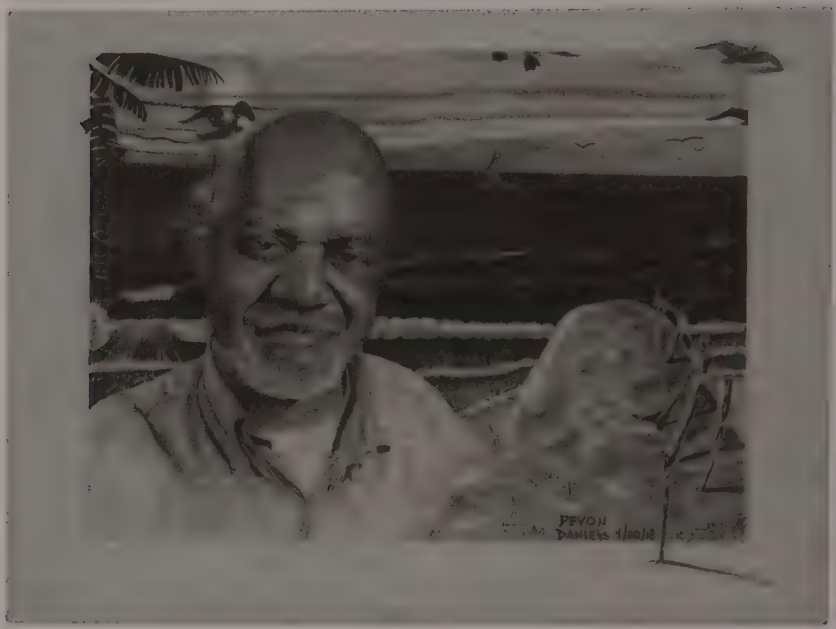
A series of other images are featured in this issue. For C.A. McAllister, poetry and image work together in *Meanwhile, Under Colorado...* The incommensurability of two selves that the artist experiences, one free and one unfree, hangs in the full moon and pitch-black sky. Damon Locks uses pen and ink panels to narrate a poetic story, asking us to both listen and look more carefully. In one scene, handcuffs circle the words "too persistent to ignore" and "disbelief is unbelievable," suggesting the scale and repetition of the carceral system, one that takes the lives of so many young Black and Brown people to a grave or a cell. The work shows embraced figures with a question, "what should be happening in this world," ending with a final, emphatic "Not this!" Sable Elyse Smith's *Coloring Book Series* vividly marks up a coloring book designed to introduce children to the court system. Smith's markings offer sarcasm, exposing the fiction that such a system could deliver anything close to fair and equal justice. The marks conjure a vibrant anger held by the many mothers, brothers, and lovers, who "do time" with their loved ones in prison—as families of incarcerated people are

also exposed to poor treatment in prison visiting rooms, exploited by steep fees for phone calls, or are shamed for having a family member inside. One page features a letter "to the white lady in Santa Fe" where Smith rightfully deploys that vibrant anger in a direct "fuck you" implicating white women as both central to and the alibi for the criminalization of Black people. This work materializes the affective ways in which the legacy of slavery lingers in the policies that sweep up one in one hundred US residents and citizens into the carceral net.

The richness of this work confronts the operations of criminalization that create the specter of an always derelict, already disposable population of people. Instead, what we see in these pages and read throughout the poetry is the full-range humanness, articulated in images of care, sorrow, anger, critique, everyday life, and joy that resist the normalization of people in prison as a homogenous group, only ever capable of crime. The life that courses throughout this work says, again and again, we are still here. And, dear reader, so are we. Now is the time to lock eyes and arms and begin the practice of freedom.

Devon Daniels

My Inspiration



A True Gift

Lawrence Dantzler-Bey

Arrested Development

Father's Responsibility

LaTrice

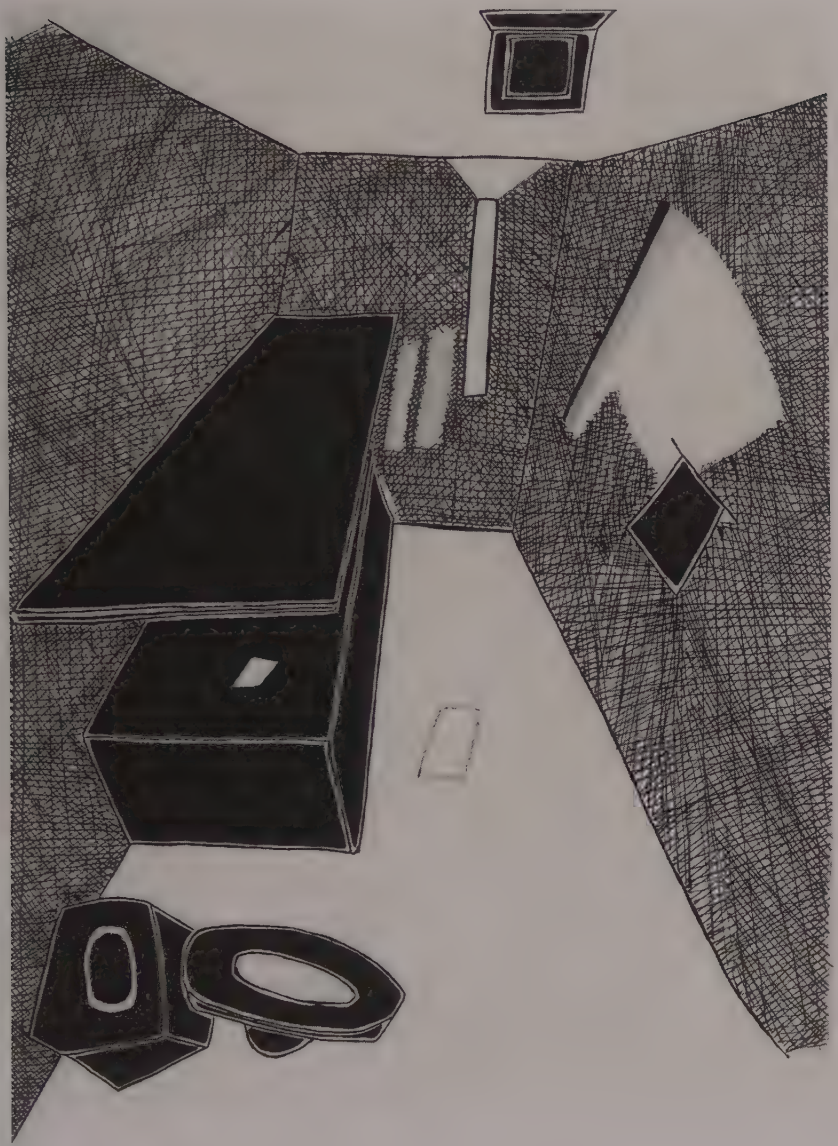
Christopher M. Campos

The Pursuit of Happiness

Buried

Manuel Antonio Gonzalez III

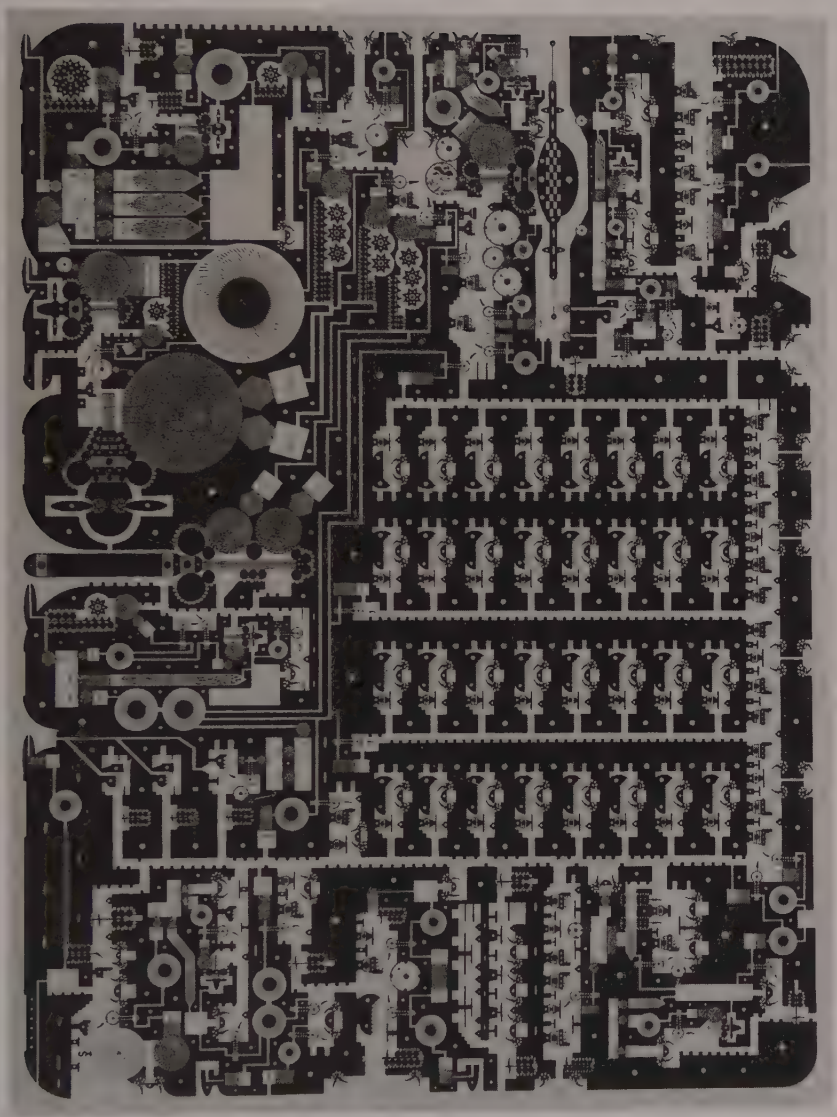
Cell



The Cheater

Frank Perfetti

From "Machine"



Carole Alden

Hollow where my soul lives

Three Feet High and Rising

COMMENT

This special issue is, in one sense, an argument about what literary arts institutions owe their audiences, and the writers and educators who make the work possible. In another, much deeper sense, it is about what the literary world owes to the incarcerated.

Joshua Bennett

Joshua Bennett

In Pursuit of the Practice of Freedom

Emancipation is given by the dominant, it being a legal, contractual, and social category. Freedom is taken and created. It exists as a right against the captor ... and is a practice shared in community by the subordinate captives.
—Joy James, "The New Abolitionists"

Abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions.
—Ruth Wilson Gilmore

And there are stars, but none of you, to spare.
—June Jordan, "Sunflower Sonnet Number Two"

For those who are said to be and become nothing. Build nothing. Think nothing worth repeating or claiming as thought *as such*, the commonplace assertion that poetry *makes nothing happen*—largely attributed, it bears mentioning, to W.H. Auden, himself a poet held in high esteem by more than one shining star within the Black aesthetic tradition—simply doesn't pass muster. Within various sectors of what Amiri Baraka and others have called "the black world," and, on a much smaller cosmological scale, what we might think of herein as a constellation of sites, subsurface and elsewhere, operating under the general heading of Black America, poetry makes *everything happen*.

Both inside and outside the classroom, countless Black children across the twentieth-century landscape grew up hearing all about Langston Hughes's theories on dreaming: the consequences of both their deferral (the threat of explosion) and utter absence (the transformation of life into a flightless bird). They knew his soul ran river-deep. They revised and reclaimed Paul Laurence Dunbar's mask. They rehearsed Gwendolyn Brooks's verses from the time they were old enough to speak. From the litany of personal testimonies you might hear soar from an uptown Pentecostal storefront Sunday morning, to the intricate pyramids of language built by girls playing hand games in the park, blue and yellow berets like starshine caught in their faultless braids, to the flock of teenagers ciphering over by the bodega, each impromptu sixteen-bar set turning everything within a half-mile radius into a stage, the message is clear. In this world behind the Veil, the literary arts are everywhere, and take on countless forms. Our children are poets. Our musicians are poets. Our organizers, activists, and community leaders have always been poets. In all its irreducible complexity, beauty, and terror, Black social life is a testament to not only the necessity, but the ubiquity, of poetry

in the everyday lives of those barred from the protections and protocols of white civil society. All those forced to make a kind of life in the break, in a cell, *underground*.

It is with this larger literary, aesthetic, and political tradition in mind then, that I would like to frame this special issue dedicated to the work of incarcerated writers: that is, as one firmly dedicated in the first instance, to the abolition of interlocking systems of capture and control which seek to limit their life chances. Our aim herein is not merely to publish beautiful poems—though I am deeply grateful for the chance to have read the fine work that graces these pages—but to make a much larger claim about the role of the literary arts in an age of mass incarceration, and the work of prison abolition itself as intimately tied to a continuous, unflinching investment in the dissemination of incarcerated people's writings, as well as the funding of arts education programming which might facilitate that praxis. Publishing, and working to continuously cultivate, the writing of incarcerated people the world over should be absolutely central to the mission of present-day literary institutions. As terms like "mass incarceration," "prison reform," and "the New Jim Crow" continue to gain prominence within the collective American consciousness, it is crucial that we meet that shift in language with renewed efforts in the material realm: doing our best to offer financial as well as other support to programs and practitioners already doing the good, necessary work of facilitating arts education on the inside. In keeping with that vision, this special issue is, in one sense, an argument about what literary arts institutions owe their audiences, and the writers and educators who make the work possible. In another, much deeper sense, it is about what the literary world owes to the incarcerated.

I speak in the language of debt and repair, captivity and abolition, here, because I believe that these are the true stakes of the matter at hand. When we talk about the *material end*, and material ends, of prison, we are necessarily also talking about the abolition of everyday carceral practices on the outside: carceral modes and motifs, carceral ways of speaking, teaching, and relating to one another. This demands, of course, a rigorous analysis of any number of standard institutional and interpersonal practices from the schoolyard to the home front: detention, suspension, expulsion, corporal punishment. Indeed, the tentacles of the prison state extend far past the brick and metal buildings that presently hold millions of this country's most vulnerable. This is part and parcel of the reason we wanted to be sure that various community voices—the children, colleagues, collaborators, and friends of those affected by our nation's singular commitment to keeping its people in cages—also had their voices reflected in the issue. The vision we seek to extend is one in which the prison is shown to be an *ecological* problem, one that damages not only individual lives but entire life-worlds, entire communities and landscapes and alternative forms of knowledge. The semiotic is a battleground. Our struggle against the prison state must also be waged

at the level of the aesthetic, and it is my sense that the poetry produced by the world's captive is an absolutely critical space in which to engage in that struggle.

As an editorial collective, we made a choice in this issue that goes against the grain of *Poetry* magazine's long-standing practice of not publishing work that has been published elsewhere. This choice was made, in no small part, because we understood the process for this special issue of the magazine would require us to approach the practice of editing with different aims and instruments than we might normally. Given the unique circumstances under which this work has been published, we thought it made sense to name that practice explicitly, and gesture toward it as a choice rooted in an ethic of restoration and the redistribution of value. Indeed, it is our hope that this issue can operate in the first instance as a site of reparation, as well as an occasion to reimagine the literary arts as a space in which we respond to the most brutal facts of our present regime with the best of the human spirit.

Finally, I want to note here—along a somewhat divergent vector than I did in the beginning of this introductory essay—that this special issue is merely one nodal point on a much larger historical spectrum of literary collection and everyday activism in the abolitionist vein (and not only the abolition of prisons, of course, but the abolition of the police state, racial capitalism, and chattel slavery), a constellation of witnesses that includes but is not limited to June Jordan, Joy James, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Tiyo Attallah Salah-El, Angela Davis, George Jackson, Jonathan Jackson, Little Rock Reed, Huey Newton, Assata Shakur, and countless others on both the outside and inside alike. This issue, at its best, is at least in part an attempt to bring this larger history to the fore. To lift the names of ancestors, as well as those of our millions of kinfolk currently held in the death grip of the carceral state. In no uncertain terms, this is ongoing, *collective* labor. It will require our most radical freedom dreams, and demand the creation of new language, new approaches, new visions for the symbolic order beyond the one we have inherited. We have gathered here in the name of that ceremony. To clarify where we have been, where we are, and gesture toward another vision of what we might yet become.

Roshad Meeks

More Than Us Contained: The Ecopoetics of Parchman Farm

My beloved brethren:—The Indians of North and South America—the Greeks—the Irish, subjected under the king of Great Britain—the Jews, that ancient people of the Lord—the inhabitants of the islands of the sea—in fine, all the inhabitants of the earth, (except however, the sons of Africa) are called men, and of course are brutes!! And of course are, and out to be slaves SLAVES TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE and their children forever!! To dig their mines and work their farms; and thus go on enriching them, from one generation to another with our blood and our tears!!!!
—David Walker's Appeal, Article 1, "Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Slavery"

We look at the world to see the earth,
at the silver, pedestal-ed globe to see the grounds,
we see what we've done with it, what it has
to do with, we see our face bent to a surface
—Ed Roberson, "We Look at the World to See the Earth"

In morningrise, the sun sits on the shoulders of the earth and colors the sky warm yellow and the land a golden orange. You'd believe this is "God's country." The rows of okra, watermelon, and sweet potato turn into a field of marigolds as the sun reaches for a higher point in the sky. Everything is expansive. The land stretches toward an impossible horizon. The sky has no edges and no ending. This is the site of Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm, an enormous prison farm whose infamy is in its capacity to reinstitute slavery in terms of its work force and its harsh treatment of that work force, who were all Black.

Mississippi's prison farm opened in 1901, a few decades after secessionists lost the Civil War and a terrorist campaign to kill the newly gained Black suffrage. The prison served to house freedmen who were said to have broken the law. As we have come to know, breaking the law meant Black people were committing minor offenses like vagrancy and loitering. These minor infractions would majorly derail life for Black folks. Mississippi kept its pattern of forcing Black people to work, this time on the chain gang. Bukka White, the Delta bluesman, sings the tale of being sentenced to Parchman Farm and working from sun up to sun down. He opens "Parchman Farm Blues": "Judge give me life this mornin'/Down on Parchman Farm." The guitar chords are arranged on a twelve-bar pattern and repeat in the background of White's nasally voice that shakes as he moves up a register. It is a song of loss and pain and the realities faced in Mississippi's infamous state prisons. White reminds us of what so many people live and know. That Parchman Farm is a

wretched place that tends toward expansion. It claims more and more.

Parchman is fenceless. Its boundaries are arbitrary, and constant political effort is used to expand the prison. The state of Mississippi has an unemployment rate of 16.3%, according to the April 2020 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is roughly 2% higher than the national average for the same month. Most of the eighty-two Mississippi counties' unemployment rates are between 6% and 12%. The counties with the lowest unemployment rates (approximately 5%) and the lowest poverty rates just so happen to be the whitest: Madison and Rankin, to name a couple. Parchman's expansion is an unethical attempt to slow down the structural failure. Mississippi's incarceration practices lean on two things: economic failure and black criminality. By pointing to the state's "structural failure" (economics) and the state's belief in Black folks' innate deviance and thus their criminality, Mississippi can continue to expand places like Parchman Farm and extend, along with its sprawling plantation-like camps, the effects of not being careful on the earth. The expansion of Parchman would mean the extension of its problems, including inadequate medical attention, unsanitary living quarters, subhuman food, concentrated and frequent violence, and environmental damage.

Prison farms are sites of captivity that enforce the myth of "the criminal" and the weapons of the state. The Union is filled with them. These camps of despair and plunder are everywhere from California to Maine. However, they are most unique in the American "Deep South." Places within the "Yazoo territory" (a region cultivated by First Peoples and stolen by conquerors) exemplify the insidiousness of prison farms. Those places, within that stolen/occupied territory, are Georgia, Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi. In content and structure, prison farms are like their antecedent "peculiar institution." They are plantation-systems updated to accommodate modern liberal sentimentalism, which means they are plantation encampments that use the rise of crime as justification for their existence and inconspicuousness to continue. It is a sprawling institution dedicated to the sport of expansion and a myth about justice and liberty.

To speak or think of the American phenomenon of mass incarceration as a fresh way of doing business is to neglect the democratic codes and racist-capitalist protocol that have always guided America the Great. The high rates of incarceration are an economic exercise, born in the 1970s, which improved on something much older and fundamental: capital accumulation along with religious imposition, male and white supremacy, and ecological domination. Yes, many countries imprison many of their people. No other country uses prisons for profit or incentivizes captivity for capital accumulation. The United States has developed the West's theological, judicial, political strategies, and the US continues to consolidate its position in dramatic fashion as a carceral state. Writ large, prisons in the American South are an economic and ecological formation, a testament to its commitment to "agribusiness," that is, chattel slavery, sharecropping, convict-leasing, and incarceration.

The prison industrial complex is a system situated at the intersection of government and private interests. It uses prisons as a solution to social, political and economic problems. It includes human rights violations, the death penalty, slave labor, policing, courts, the media, political prisoners and the elimination of dissent.
—Huey Freeman, "The Boondocks"

Mass incarceration is a social force energized by the American criminal's use-value: it pays in the New Jim Crow to lock people up. After all, according to Michelle Alexander, who points to the 13th amendment of the US Constitution, an incarcerated person can work for little to no wage. A criminal in this circumstance is effectively a chattel slave. The advantage of having a person work for little or nothing is the maximization of profit. This is what makes Edward Baptist's book, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, so revelatory. Baptist's book examines the economic power of the slave-holding South, and its dependence on free-labor. The operating logic of the South remains: the extraction of land and labor to maximize profit.

Today, those who were once relegated to the slave-class are now consigned to an unpaid, under-served class position by the state and federal juridical apparatus. Building new prisons in places like Arkansas or Louisiana helps the failing economy. In these impoverished states, prisons become the new economic base. People are deemed criminal and they, the said-criminal, are used to blunt the impact of an economy too slow to make necessary changes. Capture and confinement are the dual modes of extracting free labor, and extraction has a bias. The threat of mass incarceration is its restless desire to expand. Anyone can commit a crime, and many of us do, but the "criminal" is often a racist label applied to Black people at large and Black men in particular in this country. "Criminal" has a "reflex anti-Black male behavior-prescription," as the theorist Sylvia Wynter tells us, wherein Black men are viewed as inherently criminal and their labor is justifiably extractive.

For states with large portions of Black folks, Black people are imagined and implicated as criminals. Sometimes, "reentry" into "society" is not clean. A criminal residue still adheres to the formerly convicted, often leaving them without vital resources like housing and job opportunities. The incarceration rates of Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, and Texas evidence such. For states that suffer from a collapsed economy, the detention of Black inmates produces and sustains the state's wealth. Ta-Nehisi Coates argues, "

> It is impossible to conceive of the Gray Wastes [America's carceral-ity] without first conceiving of a large swath of its inhabitants as

> both more than criminal and less than human. These inhabitants, Black people, are preeminent outlaws of the American imagination.

And these inhabitants are only increasing in number.

I must be careful not to shake
anything in too wild an elation.
—Ed Roberson, "be careful"

Before oak, grizzlies, hills, and snow, Ed Roberson remarks, "i must be careful about such things as these," and the poem's reader gets a peek at the thing rarely considered and often unstudied in discussions of the United States' "mass incarceration." Though "mass incarceration" is recognized as the caging of a lot of (disproportionately Black male) citizens, the focus of the discourse on this racist, jurisdictive reflex obscures the completeness of America's justice and liberty practice, America's commitment to the "excuse of progress in the annihilation of races," as Howard Zinn once said. The discussion of America's *carcerality* undermines how *perfect* "mass incarceration" is, how large it is; how justice and nonfreedom are made stronger and more effective over centuries, from the age of colonialism to the age of Obama—a protocol that does more than affect humans. "Mass incarceration" is not merely a plot to cage large sections of the American population for convict labor and some form of justice. Although, if it were, if what we said about "mass incarceration" was wholly true, that would make the current discussion of "mass incarceration" astounding in its callousness. Our current discussion only addresses part of the diabolic nature of the democratic experiment. The experiment is, indeed, a complete and complex project guided by the ideas that have kept the American empire alive: accumulation of wealth, violent imposition of religion, patriarchy, white supremacy, consistent and disregarded dissent, and—the most hidden element, the thing the reader gleams in Roberson's first statement of his poem, "be careful"—ecological domination.

Roberson's poem lists natural items and announces the carefulness required in moving around them like a child moving through the woods pulling leaves from their branches and making a trail for squirrels. Whereas literary study has revealed the damage done to human beings inside and around our carceral state, "be careful" offers a way for us to think about the means and ends of "mass incarceration." To be sure, the phrase "mass incarceration" would have us believe that the raging issue of our moment is political and not, as Roberson's poem suggests, ecological. "Be careful" does what "mass incarceration" cannot. The poem considers the interaction between Man and Nature and opts for a more harmonious relationship. It does not choose

wealth over peace, strength over suffering, or standards-of-living over wholeness. It is the quality of such relationship, moving throughout African-American letters, consistent in African-American Environmental Thought, that not only describes the relationship Black folks have with Nature but also the political relationship Black folks have with Nature as dominated by the locus of America's most treasured ideas: the criminal justice system. "Be careful" is an argument for an earthly interaction. One where, yes, we walk light on the earth and yet have our light footsteps marshal our political and social considerations. What happens when we consider the problem of prisons as an ecological issue? The poem is a reminder of a different way of living.

Roberson's poem does not have the words "jail," "prison," "cage," "bars," or "suspected Black male between the ages of 18–25." He does not have statistical data showing America's incarcerated population as 20% of the world's total. (Russia and China hold the second and third place in the same category in 2015, according to the Institute of Prison Criminal Policy Research.) What he has, in "be careful," is an equipment for living, a way of thinking about Man's relationship to the earth as a way of undoing the world. And, what goes with the world are its most dearly held possessions. In this way, Roberson is like Aimé Césaire, who once wrote, "The only thing in the world worth beginning:/The end of the world of course." Roberson is a poet of the highest order, exercising an economy of language that resists the wasteful discussions often had over American dining room tables. What the poet and his work offer is a new vista for considering our social issues. That is to say, an ecological analysis of incarceration opens up new considerations for the impact of precipitously caging human beings.

"Mass incarceration" is a concept discussed at a level that sometimes overshadows the practical occasions that are jails and prisons. Even then, when we think of jails or prisons or house arrest or parole or probation or in-school suspension, are we only concerned with the form of incarceration? Does the American political imagination, the thing that drives us to fear a place that doesn't speak "American," have any capacity to think about the structure and content of incarceration? Are we only concerned with the concept of high-rate incarceration and not the source of the circumstances that yields a wider impact than a human lifespan? Roberson's poem is effective in its alternative imagination, in its concern for something else. "Be careful" is a revelatory argument against prison farms; that is, an argument that offers both demolition and creation, as the biblical connotation of the word *revelation* would have us believe.

Audrey Petty

Revolving in Your Hand

Shahid liked to call himself a triple exile—from Kashmir, from India, and from Urdu—but in fact his homeland was poetry. Which is to say: the whole world.
—Christopher Merrill, "Remembering Agha Shahid Ali"

At the start of my first one-on-one conference with Agha Shahid Ali, I slowly read my draft to him and then set the page between us on his office desk. After silently reviewing the page once more, Shahid looked up and asked, "What if you turned this poem around?"

And so I proceeded as he suggested, inverting the lines.

Reading my writing backward felt like *abracadabra* as the poem revealed something stranger, truer, more distilled in reverse. Language alchemized as the words loosened themselves from my intention. The poem became more of a poem.

Back then, I was a fledgling graduate student at the University of Massachusetts. Although I'd entered the MFA program as a self-declared fiction writer, eager to learn from John Edgar Wideman, I also wanted to study poetry in Amherst. Poetry was the form that had first set me flowing as a child, and Gwendolyn Brooks was the first poet I carefully studied. Alluring in their capacious imagination, empathy, and slyness, her poems granted me wisdom and alertness. Miss Brooks's respect for children's artistry convinced me that I could be a poet, too.

I'd soon go on to love Langston Hughes and William Wordsworth and Lucille Clifton. As a French major in college, I'd be assigned rounds of recitation to make the grade in my nineteenth- and twentieth-century French poetry classes. Some nights I walked from library to mailroom to dormitory, speaking in stanzas of a second language. I still know Alfred de Musset's *Tristesse* from memory if I slow myself and close my eyes.

The trees were soon hushed in the resonance
of darkest emerald as we rushed by
on 322, the route which took us from
the dead center of Pennsylvania

(a stone marks it) to a suburb ten miles
from Philadelphia. "A hummingbird,"
I said, after a sharp turn, then pointed
to the wheel, still revolving in your hand.
—From *A Nostalgist's Map of America* by Agha Shahid Ali

The first poem I submitted to Shahid's workshop was inspired by his own exquisite collection, *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. Daring in their explorations of displacement and exile, Shahid's aching poetry kept me rapt and still. His poems were destabilizing. Shahid taught me new ways to look at the rain.

The poem I'd set in reverse during our conference was, in part, about relocation as loss and adventure—about how driving a great distance on a turnpike at night can make you feel like you're neither at home nor away, especially with a beloved along for the ride. I revised and revised that poem until I wasn't sure if it was threadbare or shining. Shahid offered a range of challenges and homework assignments when we conferenced again. And so I'd closely read poetry with the aim of simply noticing its limitlessness.

Of course, I persisted in trying my hand. I experimented with form and wrote in code about my own fresh and stupefying grief. Still I feared—I knew—that my poems risked nothing. When Shahid gently chided me about my *prose logic*, I took his admonishment to heart. Back then I felt embarrassed, being aptly summed up as a square fiction writer, hemmed in by a penchant for linear chronology. But now, eighteen years since Shahid's passing, *prose logic* means something far more sweeping to me, and Shahid's refrain resounds as an invitation.

In 2012 I joined the Prison and Neighborhood Arts Project (P+NAP) in Illinois, a visual arts and humanities project that connects teaching artists and scholars to men who are incarcerated at Stateville maximum security prison through classes, workshops, and guest lectures. Most of my P+NAP students are condemned to what the state calls *natural life*, but what they call *living death*.[1]

When I first began teaching in prison, I taught with syllabi I'd designed for college and university classrooms on the outside. Always, always, my students met this coursework with utmost seriousness and intellectual rigor. I'd leave every class with homework I'd need to do (reading, researching, puzzling) to try to keep up with them. While I taught memoir during my first few years with P+NAP, my most recent class was a reading and writing seminar, *Mapping the Self in Community*. I shared teaching duties with my sisters, both of them teachers and scholars, but I took the first leg of the course—eight weeks—and my assigned texts included poetry by Martín Espada, Willie Perdomo,[2] Natasha Trethewey, and Reginald Dwayne Betts,

[1] "Although Illinois successfully abolished the death penalty in 2011 after a decade-long moratorium on executions, students in our classes are still condemned to die in prison. They are among the nearly 206,000 people serving life or virtual life sentences in the United States, according to 2017 research from the national advocacy organization the Sentencing Project." Alice Kim, Erica R. Meiners, Audrey Petty, Jill Petty, Beth E. Richie, and Sarah Ross, coeditors of *The Long Term: Resisting Life Sentences, Working Toward Freedom.*

essays by Saidiya Hartman and James Baldwin, *Spatializing Blackness* by Rashad Shabazz, *High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the Fate of Public Housing* by Ben Austen, and music by B.B. King and Stevie Wonder. Our first day was dedicated to introductions and expectations.

In this workshop, we'll read, view, listen to, and generate work about location and identity. Together we'll experiment with writing exercises to engage and explore complex dynamics of community-making. You'll be asked to read carefully, to share your interpretations in discussion, to write often, and—as a result of these activities—to formulate your own independent arguments in response to the works that we read together.

One paragraph into our review of the syllabus, Q. raised his hand.

"What if you don't have a community?" he asked. "We're all wearing masks here," he said to everyone. Citing the decades he'd been incarcerated at Stateville, Q. added, "I've been up in here with most of y'all all this time, and don't none of y'all know me."

Class truly began then and there.

Students proceeded to respond, with a working definition of community as positive human connection, and while most agreed they'd been closed and guarded to keep themselves safe inside of prison, a good number of students also talked about ways they'd meaningfully made community with others. D. talked about becoming like brothers with a cellie who'd come up in a rival gang. He said they would have been "mortal enemies" on the outside. G. described the purpose and camaraderie he'd found on a new debate team.[3] J. said that church meetings were a source of peace and fellowship for him. Several men attested that P+NAP itself was treasured community. And N. repeated something he'd mentioned to me in a previous workshop: how men like himself, who'd lived in the recently shuttered F house unit, devised elaborate sign language with their entire bodies to communicate across the vast expanses and constant noise of the Panopticon.[4]

We read aloud from our course packet that morning. First up were Martín Espada's "En la Calle San Sebastian" and "Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100"

[2]P+NAP students' *Where I'm From* poems were featured in a special literature edition of *South Side Weekly*. https://southsideweekly.com/where-im-from-pnap-lit-isse/. These poems were modeled after Willie Perdomo's poem "Where I'm From."

[3]The Debate Club was cancelled by the Illinois Department of Corrections in April 2018 soon after they held a public debate on the topic of parole opportunities for prisoners with lengthy or life sentences in front of eighteen state legislators, IDOC officials, and members of the media.

[4]"Imagine a wagon wheel lying on its side and missing all of its spokes. A giant guard tower sits at the hub and four stories encircle it with hundreds of cells. It housed around 400 men and not a moment of silence." Joseph Dole, "Shutting down the Panopticon: A Report from Inside the Stateville Correctional Center," *Truthout*, December 8, 2016.

(written "for the 43 members of Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees 100, working at the Windows on the World restaurant, who lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center"). We read each poem aloud three times and talked at length about what we noticed.

N., who took a turn reading "En la Calle San Sebastian," said it felt like a chant to him, and that the chant pulled him in and brought him closer to the dramatized drumming of the congas. R. remarked that the music was conjuration, making space for the living and the dead to gather on a street in Old San Juan. And J. talked about music inside of "Alabanza"—the radio was turned on in the restaurant's kitchen "even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish/rose before the bread." J. tracked the silenced music when the plane struck the North Tower, "after the thunder wilder than thunder." We marveled at the worlds contained in "Alabanza"—how the speaker conferred blessings upon everything they surveyed.

And we rested with the final stanza of the poem, dwelling inside conversation between "two constellations of smoke." A. noted music's ultimate return. We couldn't plumb definitions (*What is elegy? What is praise song?*) because the officer on duty walked in to say, "Time!" So I gathered my belongings and shook each student's hand as goodbye. The next time we'd meet, we'd begin by following Espada's poems as our prompt for our own poems. *Think about your own communities past and present. What community will you invoke and sanctify? Make use of refrain in your verse. What do you want to insist upon?*

What I didn't communicate out loud that first morning was the fact that P+NAP was beloved community to me. How strange, how humbling it is to find and make community in a place that I believe should not exist. My aim is to support a most spacious, transgressive classroom, a site of mutual flourishing. My challenge is to keep learning how to do this.

We wrote together every class that winter, sometimes at the start, always at the end. In their company, I followed my instructions and kept my hand moving, searching myself. Invariably I looked up and glanced at my fellow writers, all traveling on their own pages. Returning, returned, we shared, continuing to introduce ourselves.

Hussain Ahmed* is a Nigerian poet and environmentalist. He is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of Mississippi.

Carole Alden* was born in Orleans, France, and is a self-taught artist and mother of five. An act of self defense during an incident of extreme domestic violence left her incarcerated for thirteen years. Free for a year and a half, Alden continues to create art and advocate for battered women in rural areas.

Elvis Alves's* latest book is *Black/White: We Are Not Panic (Pandemic) Free* (Mahaicony Books, 2020). He lives in New York City with his family.

Rick Anderson* is a Colorado native with a deep love of the mountains, which is often reflected in his work. He enjoys writing poetry and short stories.

Cyrus Armajani* teaches reading and creating writing to youth who are incarcerated. He is a Jefferson Award recipient for his literacy work in the juvenile justice system and a Pushcart Prize nominee. *Benefits of Doubt* (Nomadic Press, 2016) was his first book. Armajani is Iranian-American and lives in Oakland, California, with his wife and two sons.

Armand* first picked up a pencil and drawing tools in prison. Armand says, "I wanted to challenge myself to do something creative and different. So after a year of practice and lots of mistakes on smaller drawings, I was inspired to draw LaTrice, a family member who was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer. The puzzle pieces represent life being put back together by God."

Joshua Bennett is the Mellon Assistant Professor of English at Dartmouth College. He is the author of *Being Property Once Myself* (Harvard University Press, 2020), *Owed* (Penguin, 2020), and *The Sobbing School* (Penguin, 2016).

Tara Betts lives in Chicago and is the author of the manuscript "Refuse to Disappear," as well as *Break the Habit* (Trio House Press, 2016) and *Arc & Hue* (Willow Books, 2009).

Christopher M. Campos's* upbringing inspired the creation of the drawing in this issue. Campos says, "It's a drawing of me and my brother. My brother in the passenger seat was a shooting victim at the age of fourteen. The map in the drawing represents when our parents moved us to be near the hospital that helped my brother to walk again. I subconsciously drew myself how I looked just before I was incarcerated and drew my brother Anthony as he

is today. Being incarcerated you sometimes feel like your life hit the pause button and you can only rewind memories in your head. For me painting and drawing is a place I can express myself and find a peace of mind in a stressful environment. I want to thank my parents for all their support, and would like them to know I do this all for them."

Cody Carvel* grew up in Oklahoma and Texas. His work has appeared in *Userlands, Mirage #4 Period(ical), Edna, Tin House, Yellow Medicine Review,* and *Elderly*. He has an MFA from the University of San Francisco.

Tim Casarez* has been incarcerated since age eighteen. He is thirty now. Poetry helps him transcend the bounds of his cell and former life with the insights gained from both.

Pamela Cochran* is a single mother of two who, since her release in 2018, has worked diligently to become a productive member of society and restore hope for the future into her children. Her primary focus is becoming better than she was yesterday by taking responsibility for herself and her actions.

Devon Daniels* has been blessed with a gift from God to draw and inspire. He learned to draw in a prison cell by picking up an art book and has never looked back. He was inspired by his family and friends to keep going, so he became a student and always will be a student of art.

Lawrence Dantzler-Bey's* love for art came from Dantzler-Bey's mother. Dantzler-Bey says, "I drew a picture for my mother at eight. She called all seven of my siblings to the living room and showed them my drawing and said, 'Look what my baby drew for me.' My siblings loved my drawing skills. My mother then said, 'Come here baby and let momma give you a kiss.' That was the sweetest kiss I ever received. When I discovered that my drawings bring joy to my mother, I have been drawing ever since. I have been incarcerated since I was eighteen, and I am now fifty-three. I met a master artist in 1993 named Sam Allen who taught me how to paint. I could never speak about my success without honoring my mother and Sam. I pray that I've made them both proud."

Jennifer DeMott* is putting the final touches on a poetic nonfiction book that she'd be grateful to see make its way to print. This is her first publication.

Emile DeWeaver* is an African-American writer and activist who is co-creating language, analyses, and culture to end white supremacy.

Andrey Egorov* is an artist, bilingual poet, prose writer, translator, and editor. In 2018 he was arrested for possession of illegal drugs and spent four

months in pre-trial detention. Egorov received a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence; the sentence is suspended, and as of December he is free and lives in Moscow.

Gary Farlow* has an undergraduate degree from Western Illinois University and a Juris Doctor degree from Thomas Jefferson College of Law, Atlanta.

Manuel Antonio Gonzalez III* is an artist with some works exhibited at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York; the Rosenfeld Gallery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and artwork on display at the Philadelphia Mayor's Office.

Darrell B. Grayson* (1961–2007) was sentenced to death by an all-white jury in Alabama at age nineteen. A high school dropout, he began to write poetry while awaiting execution at Holman Prison. In 1994 he joined Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty, the only resident-generated 501c3 in the nation founded and run by people on death row, and served as chairman from 2000 until his execution in 2007. The state of Alabama denied requests for DNA testing that might have proved Grayson's innocence. Grayson's work will also appear in the collection *On Wings of Hope: Voices from Alabama's Death Row* (Vanderbilt University Press, forthcoming), edited by Katie Owens-Murphy.

Clemonce Heard's* *Greenwood* (2021), selected by Major Jackson for the 2020 Anhinga-Robert Dana Prize, explores the events of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.

SH Hendley* says the work in this issue, *Father's Responsibility*, "is produced by seeing so many fathers that want to provide for their child or children but do not possess the means to. So the fathers have no other choice but to pray and look for some assistance from God or his wife."

Spoon Jackson's* most recent projects are a poem published at prisonjournalismproject.org, "A Love Poem: COVID-19," and *Long Time Gone: The Prison Music Project* with Ani DiFranco and Zoe Boekbinder. Jackson is a poet and radio producer at *Uncuffed: Stories from Solano State Prison*, featured on KALW 91.7FM out of San Francisco.

LaVon Johnson* is currently serving his twenty-third year of a life sentence, locked up since seventeen. He is published in the anthologies *By Strength, Cunning, or Charm* and *From the Inside Looking Out*.

Connie Leung* is a graduate from Marymount Manhattan College through the Bedford Hills College Program. She has been incarcerated since the age of seventeen.

Damon Locks is a musician, visual artist, and educator. He works as part of P+NAP and the School Partnership for Art and Civic Engagement (SPACE) program for the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Christopher Malec* was recently named the Luis Hernandez Florida Prison Poet Laureate by Exchange for Change, in collaboration with O, Miami Poetry Festival. He is working on his first collection of poems, and his work has been commissioned by the University of Arizona's Art for Justice project.

C.A. McAllister* can be found at thirdbeanart.com. He urges readers who want to hear what he heard to listen to "Jekyll & Hyde" by Geri X.

Jill McDonough* teaches in the University of Massachusetts–Boston's MFA program and volunteers in prisons, jails, and juvenile facilities.

Roshad Meeks* is a Mississippi native and an English PhD student researching poetics and African-American Environmental Thought.

Tiffany Melanson* teaches poetry at Douglas Anderson School of the Arts in Jacksonville, Florida, where she is faculty sponsor of *Élan*, a student literary magazine, and co-director of the Douglas Anderson Writers' Festival.

Flynard (Fly-1) Miller* is an award-winning artist from the west side of Chicago.

Justin Rovillos Monson* was a 2018–2019 PEN America Writing for Justice Fellow and is currently serving a sentence in the Michigan Department of Corrections. He is working on his first collection of poetry, "American Inmate: A Mixtape."

Kirk Nesset* is the author of the poetry collection *Saint X* (Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2012) and the story collection *Paradise Road* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007). He lives and writes in Arizona.

Mike Owens* invites all to help promote the concept of community, one poem exchange at a time.

T.L. Perez* has been writing poetry for forty-five years about his direct experiences, relationships, and self-realizations on four continents.

Frank Perfetti* writes of the work in this issue, "With a smile I let the viewer draw their own conclusions."

Audrey Petty* is the editor of *High Rise Stories* (Voice of Witness, 2013)

and coeditor of *The Long Term: Resisting Life Sentences, Working Toward Freedom* (Haymarket Books, 2018). Her poems have appeared in *Crab Orchard Review* and *Cimarron Review*.

David A. Pickett* is a poet living in Minnesota. He is an active member of the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop.

John Radford* occupies this small space with a massive urge to choose kindness, in all moments.

Jonaki Ray* lives in New Delhi, India. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Forward Prize for Best Single Poem.

Tatiana Retivov* is a Russian-American bilingual poet and translator currently living in Kiev. Retivov runs Kayala, a small publishing house that publishes prose and poetry in both Russian and Ukrainian.

Kim Roberts* is the author of five books of poems, most recently *The Scientific Method* (WordTech Editions, 2017), and editor of the anthology *By Broad Potomac's Shore* (University of Virginia Press, 2020).

Sarah Ross* is an artist and educator. In 2011 she co-founded the Prison + Neighborhood Arts/Education Project (P+NAP), which brings together artists, writers, and scholars in and outside Stateville prison to create public projects.

V. Ruiz* is a Queer Xicana bruja, writer, and artist living in Las Vegas, Nevada. Their debut is *In Stories We Thunder* (Sundress Publications, 2022).

Seven Scott* spent twenty-six years in prison. "Burial Details" argues against the apathy and banality of prison life, as seen in the burial of an unidentified inmate by his four contemporaries.

Nina Sitlingten* began writing when she was a young girl. This is her first experience with publishing and she's excited to continue to produce more pieces and publish them.

Sable Elyse Smith* is an interdisciplinary artist and writer based in New York. She is an assistant professor of Visual Arts at Columbia University.

Janine Solursh* lives in Stone Mountain, Georgia. She works closely with Common Good Atlanta, a group of Georgia professors, volunteers, and alumni who work to bring higher education to Georgia's prisons. Her hobbies are nutrition and fitness, quality time with her family, and singing.

Flying Spaghetti* writes, "Art is saving my life. Doing creative works flow positivity through me. I love to create using all types of mediums from paint, digital, graphite, and screen printing. I love to design. I love all things and emotions art brings."

Leigh Sugar* teaches writing at the John Jay College Institute for Justice and Opportunity. She lives with friends and her puppy in Brooklyn.

Devon Terrell* was born and raised on Chicago's South Side and is the father of a sixteen-year-old honor student. While incarcerated, Terrell graduated from Northeastern Illinois University's University Without Walls with a depth area major in poetic justice in Black culture.

Michael Torres* is from Pomona, California. He is the author of *An Incomplete List of Names* (Beacon Press, 2020).

Durlene Westfall* served twenty-one years in prison on a life sentence for something she didn't do and was released April 2020. She is currently filing in court to be exonerated.

George T. Wilkerson* is an award-winning essayist, poet, and artist. He is editor of *Compassion* and coauthor of *Crimson Letter* (Black Rose Writing, 2020).

Amber Wilson* comments on *The Cheater* that "One who tries to cheat life, cheats oneself out of life."

Stella Wong* is the author of *Spooks* (Saturnalia Books, 2020), winner of the Saturnalia Books Editors Prize, and *American Zero* (2018), winner of the Two Sylvias Press Chapbook Prize, selected by Danez Smith. She holds degrees from Harvard and the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

* First appearance in *Poetry*

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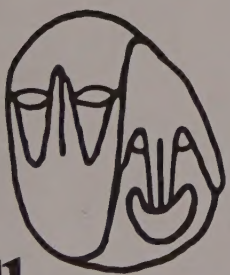

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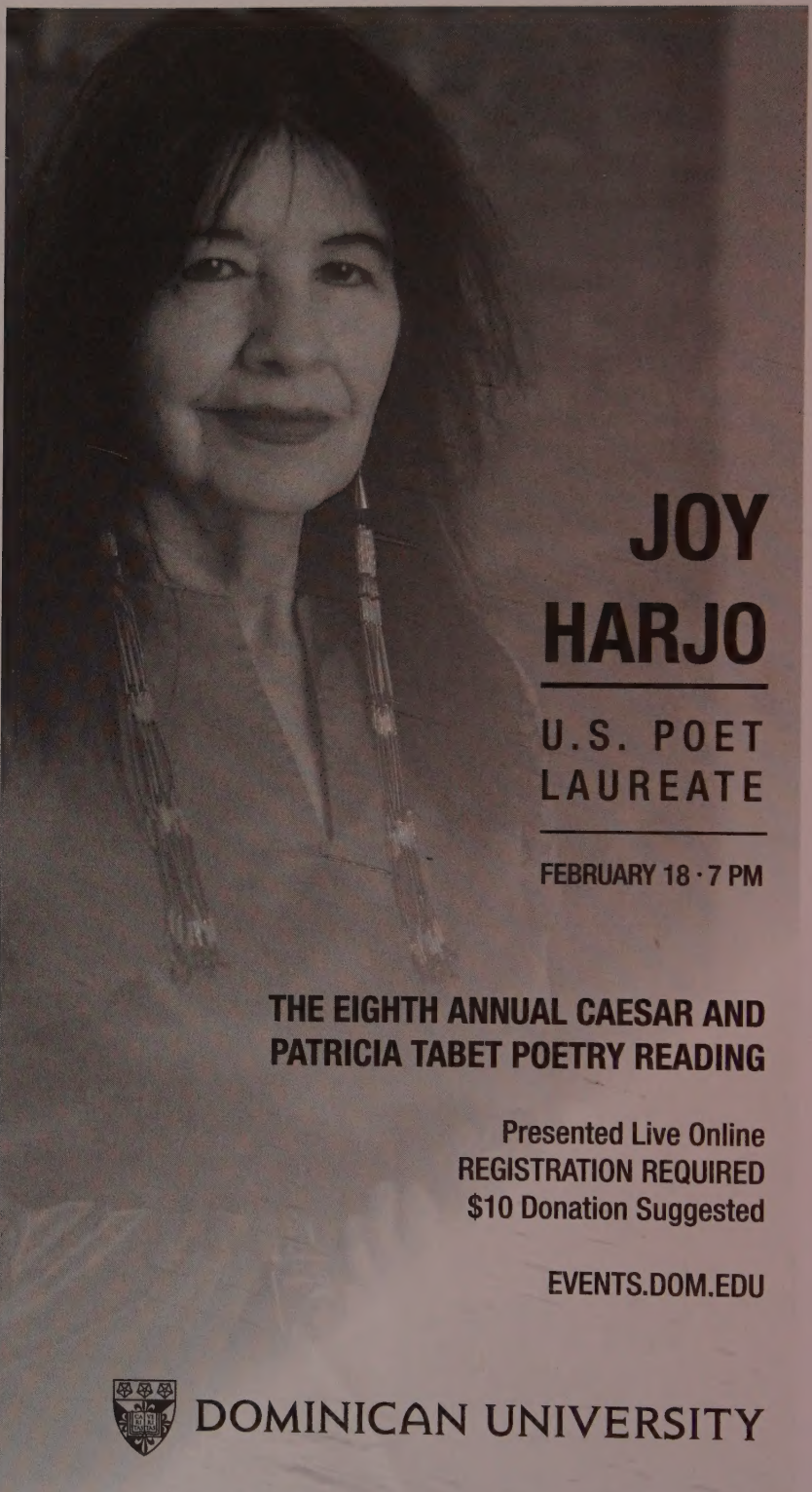

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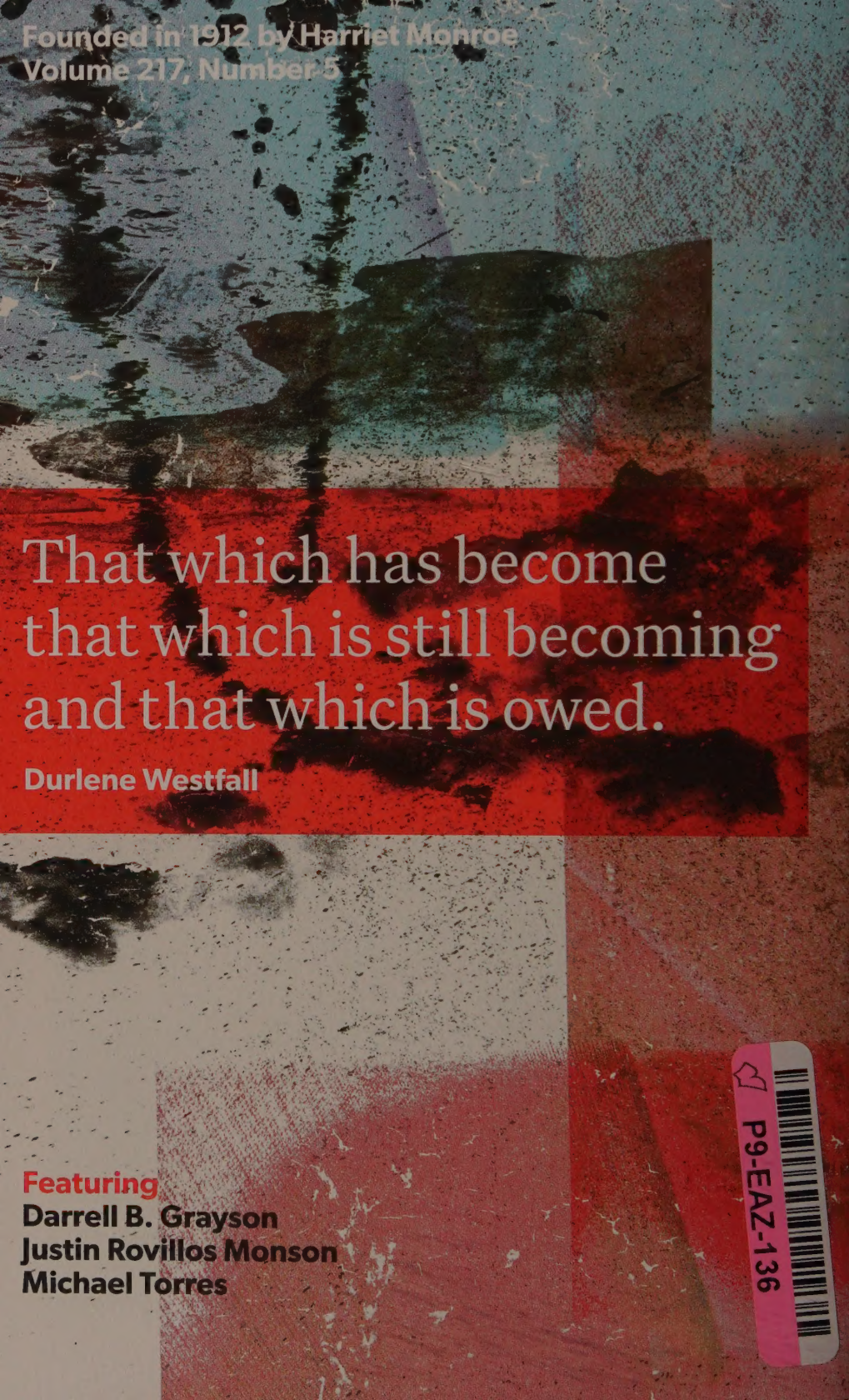

That which has become that which is still becoming and that which is owed.

Durlene Westfall

Featuring
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